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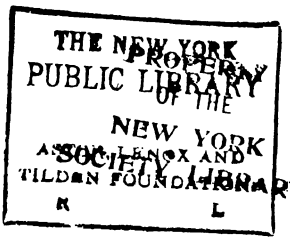
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CAL'S FURIOUS LUNGE HURLED SADDLE AND RIDER TO THE GROUND.

THE VALLEY OF THE SUN

By
WILLIAM M. McCOY

Publishers
THE H. K. FLY COMPANY
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TO
THE MEMORY OF THE MAN WHO
THROUGH SO MANY YEARS WAS
MY WISE COUNSELOR, UNFAILING
FRIEND, AND BELOVED COMRADE—
MY FATHER
DR. JOHN C. MC COY

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THE VALLEY OF THE SUN

I

THE VALLEY OF BROKEN HEARTS

AS IF it were the brink of the world, a lava hill linked plain and sky. Two horsemen rode out of the west, left the sweep of dead earth and rock to climb amid the tortuous shapes of the barrier, and reined in their horses upon the summit, vividly etched against a sky utterly blue.

The first rider seemed weary with the weight of years, and drew his blanket closely about his shoulders, while his horse's head drooped spiritless, dejected. But the second lounged in his saddle with the confident power of youth, and his magnificent pinto horse danced and reared upon a pinnacle of the summit. Swaying with unconscious grace to his horse's spirited play, the rider glanced back over the desolation behind them, and again let his kindling eyes wander over the valley at their feet, sweeping away through sublime distances into the east.

"Chief, it's the promised land!" Jerry Miller enthused.

"It is the Valley of Broken Hearts, *amigo mio!*" the aged Indian replied, his old eyes and voice somber with memories.

Jerry paused in his deft rolling of a cigarette, his puzzled eyes studying the lined, withered face of his companion.

"Why! it's as pretty a valley as the sun shines on!" he wonderingly protested at last.

But Chief Eagle Wing did not reply, and Jerry gave up his study of the strong old face, rutted by the feet of time, veiled with memories, and turned again to the valley below him. And while he looked a fierce content strained within him, for the lava hill marked the end of one world, and the beginning of another. The naked, basin-like plain to the west was dead. The gently sweeping slopes to the east were green, alive, bright with the flaming colors of countless desert flowers.

Less than half a dozen miles wide at the hill of the end and the beginning, the valley widened as it stretched eastward. Joshua trees in groups and in marshalling groves waved their dagger-covered branches in the afternoon breeze. Yuccas spread their bayonet leaves everywhere. Sage and grama grass grew thickly here, sparsely there, but everywhere was life. The ghost of a river wandered crazily across the dead basin to the west, and after winding through a gorge cut

through the lava of the hill, it twisted down the valley in melancholy nakedness.

Miles to the east a railroad drew a sweeping curve across the valley's floor, and beside this mark the sprawling shacks and store of Mirage Station were grouped about a red tank. Here and there tiny cultivated fields checkered the vast sweep of desert growths, lonely, pitifully small, each one marking a homesteader's advance in his singlehanded battle against eternal silence, awesome distance, and the smiling, luring, heartless desert. But on the narrower, opposite slope stretched the Circle Dagger Ranch, a sweeping oasis of green fields and spreading trees, while beyond the mountains spread a palisade of castle crags against the sky.

"It was the Valley of the Sun, the home of my people," the old chief began without preamble, his chin resting upon the folds of the blanket on his chest. "The river flowed always from the mountains of the sunset, and my people lived with it there in the valley," he went on, speaking in Spanish. "It was our inheritance, and we were happy—but my people were not strong enough to keep what was their own, for men came from the land of the Great White Father beyond the sunrise, and drove us to the mountains. Then other men came hurrying and cut down the trees of the mountains, and the river flowed

no more in the sun. The spirits of the mountains were left naked in storm and snow, and in their wrath they held back no water for the river, but sent great floods upon the land.

"Many men have come and looked upon the valley, and it has smiled like sunlight upon green fields, pleasant as a new wife, even as it is today. Yes, many have come. They have worked long —but the spirits of the mountains and of the river have placed a curse upon the valley—the spirit of the river danced the thirst dance about the homes of those who came, the spirit of silence leaned close, the silence which speaks with the voice of thunder, and the spirits of the mountains drove the clouds away, and sent the hunger spirit to dance with the spirit of the river—and those who have come have at last gone back into the sunrise—their hearts broken as the hearts of my people were broken."

"If any of these spirits of yours come to dance around me, Chief, why! b'jinks, I'll dance with 'em!" Jerry smiled with the thoughtless courage of youth. "A good high-steppin' spirit ought to be a right fancy dancer, especially if you'll furnish some wriggley music! As I told you, I've filed on a piece of land down there, and it's just great to have you so bubbling over with enthusiasm for my scheme!" he grinned, affection softening the light of banter in his dark, level eyes.

"On top of that I know that this valley, and that piece of land is the place I have been dreaming of ever since I can remember—and with the Circle Dagger Ranch right over there in plain sight there is no use in trying to convince me that this land and this valley is not just as good as any that lies outdoors!"

"Just as good as any the sun shines on," murmured the chief. "But Black Wolf has the power of seven evil spirits—he has degraded my people—to him all the valley is part of the Circle Dagger—he has driven—"

"I'm not hunting trouble with Black Wolf, but he will not drive me out," Jerry interrupted calmly. "He hasn't the advantages your spirits have, you see—he can stop a bullet, and he knows it!"

"Save a bullet against your time of need," said the old chief cryptically. "This valley, this land, is your inheritance from the Great White Father. He gives it to you—but you must win it from the desert! The race is long—it will be hard—but the sun will rise on a day when the Great White Father will send men with the magic rock which flows like water and then becomes one rock, and they will fill the canyon where the river's spirit creeps through this hill. Then will the floods pause, and the sun play upon still water. No longer will the spirit of the river dance the thirst

dance, for the river will flow over the valley. And the silence which speaks with the voice of thunder will be stilled by the laughter of little children. Yes, the prize is great—but the race will be long, and only the strong can take their own!"

"What are you trying to do to me, Chief?" Jerry asked soberly.

"Five summers ago you came out of the land beyond the sunrise," the old chief began again as if he had not heard, "came to the Triangle Bar Ranch. Then you rode like a squaw! And now you ride like Ramon Hampton! Ramon calls you his brother—the hearts of my people have turned to you. I am old—I would not see you broken—I have known sorrow enough—the race is long—it will be hard—"

"But the prize is a home, Chief, a home on the land!" Jerry said softly. "I've entered the race!"

"Then my heart and the hearts of my people are with you!" the aged chief lifted his hand as if in blessing. "Go to win your inheritance in the valley that was our home! Our spirits ride with you!"

Silently the young rider wheeled his horse and rode slowly down the slope into the valley, while the aged chief on the summit above him sat his dejected horse, erect, his palsied hand held aloft in token of blessing. At the bottom of the steep

pitch of the hill Jerry looked back. On the summit the old chief was etched against the sky. While Jerry looked, the Indian turned his tired horse, and disappeared beyond the brink of the hill.

While the shadows of the grotesque Joshua trees grew longer, Jerry rode slowly down the valley, so deeply moved by the old chief's parting that for a time he was unconscious of his surroundings. But gradually the sight and fragrance of the valley he had so quickly learned to love stirred his blood, and again his eyes kindled as he looked across flower-strewn, sunlit distances.

Jerry knew that within a few weeks the flowers would be gone, the waterholes dry, but he was glad to be alive, and his blood stirred and his eyes brightened—for there was magic in the air, and as he rode along his mind danced through the sunlit, flower-strewn spring afternoon, skipping lightly over what he knew must come between, to that day when his home would be complete. The sun was setting when he stopped his horse beside a small pyramid of rocks piled around a stake driven into the ground. Swinging from the saddle he examined the monument, and looked about him, breathing a deep sigh of contentment.

"Cal, you old spotted lizard, why don't you

do somethin'?" he affectionately demanded of his horse, and the magnificent animal nosed him lovingly while he went on. "Why don't you cut a few didoes? Don't you know we've come home? Come home for the first time, you and I? See those lines?" he went on, marking a corner radiating from the monument with the toe of his boot. "Well, our home is inside those lines. Come on, let's go in!" he laughed, and walked past the corner stake with the big horse beside him.

"I was going to town and stay tonight, but, Cal, I think we'll just stay home!" he continued after a short pause, preparing to remove the rolled canvas and blankets of his cowpuncher's bed which was tied behind his saddle. Unrolling the bed on a level spot, he sorted out the various articles the operation disclosed, and hung a small sack of jerked beef on one of the spikes of a convenient Joshua tree.

"I guess I'll occupy this room tonight, Cal," he observed whimsically. "I don't know whether it's the flower room, or the haunted chamber, but it seems roomy and well ventilated. Maybe jerky and a cigarette doesn't seem much like a welcome home banquet," he went on, deftly removing the saddle from the horse's back, "but they sound good to me tonight. You find a waterhole, and then come back to this grass around here for your supper, old top. This is our first meal at

home, and we've got to eat it together, 'cause you and I haven't got anybody else, Cal!" he finished, removing the bridle and turning the horse loose.

Jerry sat upon his bed spread upon the ground, munched the jerked beef, and drank from a saddlebag canteen, while he watched the lingering colors in the sky, and night drew her veil of mystery over the desert. The big horse had trotted off in search of water, as if in obedience to his master's command, and before Jerry had finished his meal the lonesome pinto came back to graze close beside him.

The reflected glory of the sunset lingered long in the eastern sky above the castle mountains. While Jerry smoked in silent content the scarlet streamers changed to pink, grew paler and faded to lavender, and lastly to blue. Ten thousand thousand stars flashed into the heavens, sparkling clear in the desert air. For a long time Jerry sat, lost in thought, while the horse grazed near.

"How does home grub taste, you ornery old snake?" he came out of his reverie to ask affectionately. "Other folks would think I was locoed, if they heard me talk, but you never laugh at me, an' you never tell, an' sometimes I've got to talk or bust!" he confessed.

"Maybe I *am* locoed over this home thing, Cal, but we've just got to put this job through. My folks never amounted to so much; they were just

the sort of people who pay their debts, go to church maybe, and fight when there is some fighting to be done. But the first of them came to this country a long time ago, and there was one thing about them different from some fiolks—they always had a home, and it was always on the land. The two things are mixed up together inside me some way. My father thought he'd try the city, and he didn't last long. Mother didn't last even as long as he did.

"It was back east, like I've told you, Cal, and I quit school and went to work in an office. But all the time it seemed as if the city was going to smother me, and while I kept books I was seeing long distances with the sun shinin' on 'em, and breathing air that was free and sweet. At last I couldn't stand it any lónger, so I came out here, thinking I was going to be a settler right on the spot. If old Bryce Hampton hadn't staked me to a job on the Triangle Bar I guess I would have starved. But we're ready to start now, Cal. I slipped the Commissioner sixteen bucks for fees and things, signed and swore to some papers, an' b'jinks! this place is ours if we can make a ranch out of it. I've bought stuff to build a shack, and a whole outfit. Ole Rainbow Ben will be here tomorrow with the whole caboodle, and we can get busy."

Again he became silent, slipped off his chaps

and boots, and drew his blankets over him. "Say, Cal, if any of the old chief's spirits come to dance around here tonight you wake me up!" he called sleepily, and lay down with his face to the stars.

II

MARJORIE OF MIRAGE MEADOWS

"HEY! YOU locoed rep-tile!" Rainbow Ben yelled in pleasant greeting early the next morning when he sighted Jerry sitting beneath a Joshua tree, with Cal, ready saddled, standing near. "Where do you want this mess o' trouble unloaded?" continued the freighter. "This goin' is heavy, an' I got to keep this string o' sons o' sin pullin' stidy till I git right thar!" added the skinner, turning his attention to his strung-out team of eight mules.

"Come on, you old horse thief, I'll show you!" Jerry laughed back as he mounted. Leading the way through the trailless desert growths as surely as if upon a road, Jerry finally stopped on a tiny knoll in a grove of Joshuas. "This is where my house is going to be," he called. "We'll unload right here."

The heavy freight wagon was piled with lumber for a homesteader's shack and modest barn, reels of barbed wire for fences, a table, two chairs, a bed, and boxes containing supplies of nonperishable foods, cooking utensils, dishes and other absolute necessities, while on top of all was

tied a cook stove. Hooked behind was a trail wagon—a large spring wagon, battered but still sturdy, and its freight was made up of two barrels of water, a plow, a small cultivator and a harrow, a mattock, a pick, brush hooks, hoes, and shovels. The wheels of the wagons sank into the soft decomposed granite soil, and the mules of the straining team heeded Rainbow Ben's "whoa" with unanimous relief.

"So this is where you air plannin' to e-rect yer sue-boor-bon home," observed Rainbow, tying the jerkline to the seat, and looking around. He was a thin little man, weighing perhaps one hundred and thirty pounds in his boots, overalls, jumper and battered sombrero. Forty years of chasing rainbows in the desert had made him old on the outside, had lined his face with the records of many disappointments. But through his keen gray eyes his heart shone, eternal in its youth and hope, the kindly heart whose faith had won him his name—faith that dreams could be made to come true tomorrow in spite of disaster and today's defeat. A fringe of white hair hung down below his hat, and his wisp of chin whisker was gray, but his head perched perkily as a lizard's upon his shoulders.

"Well," he considered, continuing his inspection of the locality, "I got to admit that she is a sightly location, well drained, plenty o'

scenery an' sky, an' she ought to run a fair tonnage o' snakes an' lizards to the acre—jes' a fair—"

"Shut up and get busy unlashing that load," Jerry interrupted good humoredly. "I want that stove and those boxes of chuck, and I want them now, 'cause my valet got sort of careless this mornin', and forgot to serve me my breakfast in bed! If you can manage to eat a bite, you can join me while I surround some bacon and flapjacks and coffee!"

"Singin' snakes! Eight o' clock, er thereabouts, an' you ain't fed yit!" exclaimed Ben, rapidly unfastening the ropes which held the load in place. "I did have some ham an' fried spuds an' coffee sometime along the forepart o' the day, but I might j'ine ye in a bite."

The stove was set up on the ground with a single length of pipe in place, and a fire of dead twigs and greasewood was soon burning merrily. While Jerry prepared the meal, Rainbow Ben kept the fire going, placed the table in the shade of a giant Joshua, set it quickly, placed the two chairs, and rummaged through the boxes of supplies until he found a can of syrup for the pancakes.

The two men ate in contented silence, so far as words are concerned, while Cal edged closer, patient, but expectant. When Jerry finally leaned

back to roll a cigarette the big horse stole up behind him, and nosed his shoulder. A little defiant red showed through Jerry's tan, but in spite of Rainbow Ben's teasing gaze, he placed another flapjack in his plate, covered it with syrup, cut it into bits and fed it piece by piece with his fork to the horse.

"I beg yer pardon, hawse," laconically observed Rainbow. "I didn't know I was robbin' you of yer chair at the table!" he added, fishing for his trusty plug of Mule Skinner's Delight while he watched Cal consume the treat with huge satisfaction.

"Jine me in a chaw?" he grinned, ceremoniously offering the plug to the horse, who was still nosing his master. "Them land agents, Blair an' Jennings, air operatin' here ag'in this spring," Ben ventured, after Cal had declined the proffered plug, and he had bitten off a generous "chaw" himself. "Yes, they've located quite a bunch o' suckers," he went on, but Jerry was giving his entire attention to rolling his cigarette. "They've got a new scheme this time," Ben tried again, "a right new one. Instid o' usin' the railroad, they bring 'em in to show 'em the land in tin lizards! automo-biles! Yes, sir—all the way from Cajon! Then the suckers don't see any o' the folks down at Mirage, er nobody else that pair o' snakes don't want 'em to see," he went on. "It ain't that the

valley don't come up to what they promises as makes them folks suckers. But this team o' snakes tells 'em the dam is shore goin' through. An' she is, o' course—but I been a-waitin' fer that time fer so long it sorter seems like it don't matter one way or t'other sometimes. But these folks think it's comin' right away. Mebbe some of 'em have seen how big the desert pays when she surrenders an' starts workin' fer a man she likes, but they don't know nothin' about the fight that comes first. An' you kin bet yer eye that Blair an' Jennings don't tell 'em! But they're locatin' a bunch, like I said, an' I'm blamed if they ain't located somebody on that quarter adj'inin' you, right down there on Mirage Meadows! Yes, sir, you're goin' to have neighbors! An' these new neighbors o' yourn air a brace o' gals!"

"Girls!" gasped Jerry.

"Yes, gals!" laughed Rainbow. "I figgered that would—"

"Tell that to a tourist," scoffed Jerry. "You always were the biggest liar around here except Wolf Vogel," he grinned, "and I should think you could corral a better one than that."

"Mebbe you'll believe it when you see 'em!" countered Ben with unruffled good humor.

"Have *you* seen them?" demanded Jerry.

"Not jes' exactly," Rainbow admitted, "but their name is Hope, an' they're sisters. They's a

lot o' stuff down at Mirage come by freight fer 'em same time yours come, an' they're goin' to show up on the mornin' train tomorrow. One of 'em wrote to Major West, sayin' sh'd been referred to him as a reliable storekeeper, only she called it 'merchant,' an' askin' him to engage a freighter to move her an' her sister with their stuff to their homestead. So I'm movin' 'em up tomorrow mornin'."

"You say these girls are actually going to homestead alone out here!" exclaimed Jerry. "Oh, well," he considered, "just because they're females doesn't prove they're girls! I'll bet—"

"There you go," complained Rainbow, "sp'ilin' everythin'. Here I jes' had ye fitted out with a couple'a golden-haired an' blue-eyed girls, an' you bust my fairy dream! Jes' fer that I hope they is a pair o' Carrie Nations with a special axe all sharp fer everybody what smokes cigarettes!" he finished as they rose to begin unloading the wagons.

"How you figgerin' to pull that big spring wagon an' them farmin' tools?" Rainbow queried as they piled the lumber. "Goin' to hitch yerself beside that p'izen snake of a hawse o' yourn?"

"I've bought a team from Bryce Hampton," Jerry told him. "Ramon will bring them over some day."

"Well, you're lucky," Ben announced, "'cause

they ain't a hawse can be bought in the valley. The Circle Dagger ain't sellin' none, an' a feller buyin' fer the English Army cleaned out the rest. I don't know what all these settlers is goin' to do."

"Have Blair and Jennings really located a lot of them?" Jerry asked, still doubtful. "I thought their game was dead."

"'Twas, but they resurrected it with this new scheme," Ben averred. "Them gals is the fourth party they've located on Mirage Meadows in the last eight years to my sartin' knowledge. An' they got from a hundred an' sixty to three hundred and twenty dollars from each one! An' all on account o' that waterhole that goes dry before summer even gits started!"

When Rainbow Ben finally drove away, Jerry surveyed his outfit critically while he heated water and washed dishes. Free of housewifely duties for a time, he systematically laid out his camp, erected a shelter over the barrels of water, and carefully covered his stock of food, for he knew he must camp in the open for quite a while before he could complete his modest "sue-boor-bon home." Noon came before he was ready for it, but he stopped for a snack because he knew that the race could not be finished that day—that the test would come "tomorrow"—and that "tomorrow" stretched before him for at least three years.

Jerry cooked and ate his supper that night content, for close beside his lonely table lay the foundation of his home. The redwood sills, the wood everlasting, were level and firmly planted in the soil, and the pine floor timbers spiked in place across them. Supper was over and the dishes washed, when Cal came back from hunting his own supper, and joined his master. Together they wandered over the knoll.

"Here's where the barn is going to be, Cal," Jerry indicated a spot some distance from the house, "an' some day it will reach about over to that last Josh tree. Then we'll have a place down there for the hogs," he indicated the spot with a pointing hand, "and when things work around, I'll build a house in front of the shack, and use the shack for an office! I guess I had better stop right now," he chuckled, patting the horse, "and go to bed! That's about enough for our first day on our own ranch!"

For a time Jerry lay in his blankets looking at the stars, but just before he went to sleep he turned and addressed Cal, browsing near. "We were mighty easy, Cal, to let Rainbow get a rise out of us with that girl talk! He's the worst liar—" but even though Cal appeared to be paying strict attention, Jerry's words trailed off and he went to sleep with his opinion of old Ben unfinished.

In spite of his avowed skepticism, Jerry found it hard to keep his eyes strictly upon his work next morning. Breakfast over and the camp chores finished, he began laying the floor of his house. But in the clear air he plainly saw the morning train as it crossed the valley, and he stopped to watch—mentally declaring that he knew it would tear through Mirage Station as if the place were the center of a plague, and that he had no interest in it anyway—but the train stopped!

"Now what do you think of that?" he asked Cal, who, always hungry, was investigating a half-keg of nails. "Say, what if Rainbow wasn't lyin'! But shucks! it would be just our luck! I'll bet these are a pair of—"but Cal wandered off in search of something more tempting than nails, and Jerry resumed his work.

While he hammered and sawed steadily, his uneasiness increased as the hours went by. When noon came he saw a spot of white shimmering through the Joshuas, and he knew that someone had settled on Mirage Meadows—at least someone had erected a tent there. A thoughtful study of the speck of white revealing nothing, he ate a cold lunch and returned to his work. But an hour later he built a fire in the stove, heated a pan of water, and shaved with unusual care. When Cal came up inquiringly in answer to his

master's summoning whistle, Jerry groomed him until the big black and white pinto glistened. The horse saddled, Jerry pulled a clean shirt out of his pack, put it on, and carefully adjusted a blue necktie. Then he pulled on his chaps, critically inspected himself in his shaving mirror, and swung into the saddle.

"We might as well mosey along to town and see if there is any mail for us," he observed to Cal, "but there's no use stoppin' to ask those folks down on the Meadows if there is anything we can get them, 'cause they've just come from town. Still, we might stop an' say 'howdy,' just to be neighborly—but I guess we won't today—they haven't had a chance to get settled yet."

But as he drew abreast of the camp in the Meadows, Jerry slowed Cal's gait, and swung him farther and farther from the direct line toward Mirage Station, and soon the big horse and his rider were approaching the tent. "Sufferin' sidewinders! they *are* girls!" Jerry gasped as he caught sight of two figures, one on the ground, and the other in the fork of a giant Joshua, trying to climb higher.

"Don't climb that tree!" he called in warning, spurring Cal, "the spines will cut your hands and—" but just then he automatically slid Cal to a stop beside the tree, and words deserted him, for he found himself looking into a pair of half-

startled, wondering brown eyes, eyes lighting a face of changeful color and curves and graciousness, beneath an aureole of glinty brown hair.

"I—I beg your pardon," he stammered after a monent, "I was afraid you would hurt yourself. You see those spines not only have points, but saw edges, and below the big bunches on the ends of the limbs they curl back and point down."

"I have just found that out," she smiled, a flashing smile of both lips and eyes, "but I must put this wee birdie back into his nest," and through a haze Jerry saw that in one hand she tenderly held a baby bird. "He fell out, and he will die if he is not put back. See, the nest is on the end of that branch."

"Perhaps I can reach it," suggested Jerry.

"Please try," she urged, cuddling the wee bird against her cheek a moment before placing it carefully in his outstretched hand. Jerry rode directly under the branch, but the nest was still out of reach, so, commanding Cal to stand quiet, he unconcernedly stood up in his saddle, and while the girls watched, excited by his thoughtless display of horsemanship, he returned the little stray to its home.

"Oh, I'm so glad—thank you so much!" called the girl, jumping to the ground from the tree fork, while Jerry slid back into his saddle.

Feeling himself reddening under the friendly

gaze of the bird rescuer, her eyes appraising his lean strength and rugged face with its large and friendly, but firm mouth, strong chin, and fine eyes, Jerry turned to the other young woman, and found her regarding him with frank curiosity. Dressed in a simple but dainty gingham, her arms were full of desert flowers, her face beneath its crown of fair hair was as delicately white as a yucca bloom, and her eyes held the fathomless blue of desert skies.

"As we are neighbors, and you are just getting settled, I stopped in to see if I could be of any use," Jerry began. "Miller is my name, Jerry Miller, and I have located a homestead just above yours on this slope."

"Oh, Mr. Rainbow Ben told us about you!" smiled the bird rescuer. "He said you were a 'hawse thief an' a lizard, but outside o' that a fair to middlin' cuss!'" she mimicked. "I'm Marjorie Hope, Mr. Miller, and this is my sister, Lenore. You are an old-timer here, aren't you?"

"Yes," he told her gravely, "I moved into the valley night before last!" and the three laughed together, giving Jerry a chance to observe Marjorie more closely. She was not beautiful, as Lenore was, but straight and strong, alive as life, vivid as a cactus bloom. She stepped with a quick, free stride, and was more than satisfying in her short skirt and blouse of khaki.

"Oh! you wonderful horse!" Marjorie flashed from Jerry to Cal, but when she tried to pat his nose Cal snorted, reared, and backed away.

"Be a little careful. He's not used to girls, and he might bite you!" warned Jerry, as he swung out of his saddle.

"He seemed as gentle as a kitten," she protested. "Was it 'Cal' you called him?"

"Yes, that's short for California."

"What a funny name for a horse," laughed Lenore. "How did you happen to name him that?"

"Well," explained Jerry, "you see that white spot on his side? That looks a little like the outline of the map of California, so I just named him that."

"My! what a big spot!" exclaimed Marjorie.

"Yes, it is big—but then California is a big state," Jerry considered, and when they had laughed together again all felt thoroughly acquainted.

"I suppose, being an old settler, that you are going to scold us for trying to homestead," Marjorie said, making a wry face. "The old storekeeper at Mirage did, and his nice wife almost cried when we started, and Mr. Rainbow Ben told us all the terrible things that have happened in this valley for the past hundred years!" she finished, an appeal softening the defiance in her eyes.

"Why! I'm rooting for you!" he told her.

"Let's shake, Mr. Jerry!" she smiled, extending her hand. "Everything is so wonderful here," she went on, giving him an enthusiastic grip, "and things just *have* to go right!"

"This is a regular country," he answered, releasing her hand. "This valley can't be beaten—the only trouble is they put the rains and everything else so far apart!"

"It *is* beautiful—wonderful," Lenore added in her low, husky voice. "But things *are* dreadfully far apart—the distances I can see in all directions almost frighten me. And it is so still! But I suppose I will be used to it in a day or two."

"That feeling will all pass, and you'll be as crazy about all this room as I am," Jerry promised recklessly. "Can I be of any assistance? Have you girls everything you need? You seem to have quite an outfit scattered around here."

"We have everything!" enthused Marjorie. "Here are the lumber and things for our house. Mr. Blair was *so* good! He picked out everything for us, and we decided upon one of these houses which come all sawed and numbered. It will have just one room, with a sleeping porch on one end, and a tiny kitchen off the other. We are going to build it ourselves, and it will be great fun. We brought the tent to live in until the house is finished."

"You will have the mansion of the valley," promised Jerry. "But when you have any heavy lifting to do, you must call upon me. How about water?"

"Come and see our spring," she invited, and led him toward the water hole about which a score of range cattle were standing, while Lenore remained in camp, hunting for something in which to arrange the flowers she had picked. "I don't know what to do about this," Marjorie told him, when Jerry had driven the cattle away and they stood beside the muddy spring. "The cattle make the water unfit for use, and I do not know how to clean it, or to keep them out of it."

"I'll be glad to fix that, Miss Marjorie," he urged, "if you'll let me, and have a shovel and an axe, and can spare a couple of planks and some barbed wire."

When he found the shovel, Jerry deepened the shallow spring, digging a square hole about two feet across and three feet deep. With the lumber and tools Marjorie brought him he constructed a square box without top or bottom, and sunk it into the hole he had dug. "This forms a curbing for your spring," he explained, and while she held it in place he shoveled clean earth into the hole around the outside of the box, and tamped it firm. With a large saucepan she brought him,

he bailed out the water so rapidly that soon the seepage spring was all but dry, and then laid short boards across the top of the spring box to keep out sun, insects, and dirt.

"About supper time," he promised, "you can get all the water you want." Now we will fix it so the cattle will have to keep out."

When he had dug five post holes, he took the axe and started out to get the needed fence posts, while Marjorie followed, eager to help. Felling five small Joshua trees, Jerry cut the trunks into post lengths, and carried them to the spring. While Marjorie held each post steady he shoveled and tamped, and soon the five were firmly planted, one at each corner of a square about the spring, and the fifth close to one corner, leaving a space between it and the corner post far too narrow for any cow or steer to negotiate, but wide enough to allow the girls easy access to the spring. When the wire was stretched Marjorie tried to thank Jerry, but, deprecating the service he had rendered, he shouldered the tools and was starting toward camp when she laid a timidly restraining hand upon his arm.

"I have something else to thank you for, and—another favor to ask," she said hesitantly, while he looked wonderingly down at her. "I thank you—oh *so* much! for being enthusiastic about our chances—our success. Please be enthusiastic

that way whenever you are talking to Lenore. You are so strong—and she just *has* to have strength to lean on—and, Mr. Jerry, we—I have to succeeed here! We are from New York. We both worked in the city, but Lenore has never been strong, and a year ago she had to stop. You noticed her voice? It is her throat, and the doctors—Oh! but I *know* this wonderful outdoors and clear air will make her well! Lenore and I have only each other, and for years, maybe not very many, but it seems ages, we've dreamed of having a home in the country, with chickens, and fruit, and even pigs!

"We learned of Mr. Blair and his partner through an advertisement, and wrote them. We managed to save a little money, and something had to be done for Lenore; she had to have a change, and so, when they agreed to locate us on some good land, where we could make a living after the first year, we decided to try. And we are going to win! We have to win! If things go badly sometimes, you boost, won't you, for Lenore's sake?"

"I'll just naturally raise the roof, Miss Marjorie," he promised.

"And remember she is sick—and moody," Marjorie went on. "The desert is so big—and so silent—I want to keep it from overwhelming her. When you are passing will you stop some-

times—to jolly her up—to keep her from getting too lonesome?"

"Don't you think *you* will ever get lonesome?" he asked, even though his words frightened him.

She looked away over the sweeping distances so that he could not see her eyes, but she shook her head.

"Well," he considered, "it's kind of a sudden attack, but I feel some mighty lonesome spells comin' on! If I promise to come over and try to keep Miss Lenore from being lonesome, will you try to cure my—er—spells?"

"You're on, Mr. Jerry!" she laughed, leading the way to camp.

III

A PAIR OF THE DESERT'S OWN

IN THE shade of his half completed house, Jerry was battling valiantly one afternoon with soapsuds, shirts, and discouragement, literally immersed in his occupation, when Marjorie entered the grove of Joshuas and half-shyly approached. All about him, hung upon yuccas and Joshua trees, were the fruits of his labor, and he was washing his best shirt for the fourth time that afternoon, determined to make it white or wear it out, when Marjorie called a laughing greeting. He jumped, surprised, and a deep red burned through his tan as he answered, but he held doggedly to his work.

"I've found out lately why fellows out here turn squawmen," he declared, mournfully, holding up the shirt. "It's the everlasting cooking and washing—it locoes them! Why! a man batching no sooner gets started on a job of work than it's time to cook something! And as for washing"—he stopped, unable to do the subject justice, and hung the shirt on a yucca.

"I remember that shirt, but I thought it was a white one!" she teased.

"Maybe our laundry department isn't just exactly all it might be," he laughed, "but all the same Cal and I have a regular place here. This is your first visit, so I'll have to show you around. It's funny, Marjorie, you sort of have to shut your eyes to see some of Cal's and my things, but they are there just the same—all we have to do is to make them real!"

"That is the way with most of my possessions," she smiled a little, "they are just waiting to be made real!"

Hungry for sympathetic encouragemnt, Jerry spread his vision before her, and because she had a vision of her own, his was plain to her, and she reflected his enthusiasm. At last they sat down upon the doorstep of the half completed cabin. Marjorie's eyes wandered to the far summits of the castle mountains, and Jerry watched her furtively, silently.

"We haven't seen you for four or five days," she finally began, "and the loneliness—and everything, is—"

"Has something happened, Marjorie?" he interrupted.

"Four nights ago," she told him, "the wire disappeared from the fence you built around our spring! And hundreds of cattle came—crowding as if they were being pressed together—until I

was afraid they would knock down our tent and trample us!"

"The wire disappeared!" he repeated slowly, as he reached for tobacco and cigarette papers.

"I put new wire in its place, and cleaned out the spring," she went on, a little nettled at the seemingly detached calm of his interest. "I watched that night, but nothing happened. The next night the cattle came again—crowding and charging—it was hideous. I tried to watch again last night, but Lenore and I were both so worn out we finally went to sleep. This morning the wire was gone again!"

"And cows don't eat barbed wire!" he drawled, his voice low and even, his eyes half shut.

"No, and I—we are alone, and the desert is so big! Lenore is so frail, and this—but neither of us is thinking of quitting—we want to fight, but we don't know what to do, and that makes us feel so helpless!"

"There are a good many different kinds of snakes on the desert, Marjorie, "he said cryptically. "I'll watch near your spring tonight, and you and Lenore get a good rest."

"Oh, I didn't mean to make you go to so much trouble," she protested, "and they might come, whoever they are, and you would be alone, and—"

"I'm only afraid they won't come," he interrupted.

"You won't—kill anyone, Jerry!" she urged, both comforted and a little frightened by the calm resolve she read in his eyes.

"So you want these reptiles captured alive," he teased, seeking to divert her mind. "Well, I'll try to get you an extra fancy specimen, one with pink whiskers!" he laughed. "There is no moon tonight, and after it gets dark I'll slip down and hide near the spring. No one will see me go then, and you won't see me either. But I'll be there, and you girls stop worrying and get a good rest."

"You don't know how grand it will be—feeling perfectly safe for one whole night!" she smiled. "I love the desert already, but ever since that wire vanished the first time the loneliness has—come so close it smothered me. It was harder on Lenore, of course, but one night's sleep will make us both as good as new," she went on, rising and beginning to gather up the array of shirts hanging on yuccas and Joshua trees. "I can't do much to repay you, Jerry," she answered his wondering look, "but I *can* play squaw and wash these, and iron them too! I'll bet you forgot an iron!"

"You can't do *much!*" he enthused. Say, if you'll wrastle those things for me I'll watch your place for a year!"

The desert stars made the steel blue heavens glorious, but the night lay like a thick blanket

over the breast of the wastes when Jerry slipped through the scattered Joshua trees towards the spring. Settling himself between two tall yuccas whose long leaves crossed above him, he became a part of the night. The tent was a dark, half-defined shape, and the fence about the spring all but invisible. Hour after hour he watched. Now and then a lone steer or a cow with her calf wandered near, found the water fenced, and wandered off in search of another waterhole. Dawn came, and then suddenly the sun looked into the valley and surprised Jerry stretching and yawning, disappointed that his watch had been without incident.

Just as he turned to go back to his own homestead Lenore came out of the tent, and called him in her low, husky voice. More than fair she was, in the glory of the new day, and in spite of his protestations she took his arm and led him to the tent, where Marjorie joined her in insisting that he remain for breakfast. For an hour the three lingered gaily about the table spread in the wilderness, and then Jerry tramped away through the Joshuas, promising to return again that night.

He was sleepily approaching the knoll upon which he had founded his home, when he stopped suddenly, instantly wide awake, and then charged up the rise, to pause upon its summit, inarticulate with amazement. His house was gone! The

floor and foundation remained, but the partly finished walls had been taken down—had disappeared. Feverishly he took an inventory. All the lumber for his cabin and barn was gone, and with it all his supply of food. He searched for tracks. But cattle had been everywhere during the night; no trail was visible. Whistling for Cal, he straightened up, and as his eyes wandered through the sweeping distances a deadly calmness grew within him.

"Cal," he said, when the horse came trotting up, nickering a welcome, "you heard what the old chief said about spirits dancing in this valley. Well, there's been mighty funny goin's on, Cal, so funny that we'll just scrape an acquaintance with some of the dancers! But first we'll have a look—see, and try to find our house and grub."

The horse saddled, Jerry began circling the knoll on foot with the pinto following. Wider and wider his circles grew while he studied the tracks on the ground. At last he paused, then followed a rutted path for a dozen rods.

"These spirits used burros to pack that lumber and stuff," he told Cal," and they headed toward the river. We'll do likewise."

Reaching the edge of the dry wash down which the spirit of the dead river wandered, Jerry turned "up stream," riding carefully, studying the trampled sand and earth, searching each deeply

eroded *barranca* for a sign of his stolen property, all the while equally alert and ready for the clash he expected, even hoped for.

Marjorie and Lenore stopped their happy work upon their growing home at the sound of hoof-beats, and presently a man whom they had never seen reined in his horse before their tent. Marjorie stepped forward, smiling, and looked up at a big rider who someway radiated force, brute force. His face was heavy featured, his eyes close together between black brows, his mouth large but thin lipped, his neck thick, and he looked at her appraisingly, unblinkingly.

"Buenos dias," he said, after a moment, and swung from his saddle without invitation. "I heard that two pretty girls were homesteading over here, but I did not believe it until now," he swept off his sombrero, revealing a small round head covered with a thatch of coarse black hair. "I'm Wolf Vogel," he introduced himself pompously, "and I own the Circle Dagger Ranch!"

"Oh! Mr. Blair told me of you," Marjorie began eagerly. "Our name is Hope, and Mr. Blair located us here. He said that you raised a great many horses, and advised me to buy one from you. I am not quite ready for it yet, but I must have one for my farming work."

"I have no horses for sale," he told her, "but I have horses I might lend," and his slow look,

going over her from head to foot, made Marjorie feel unclean, as unclean as if slimy hands were handling her fair flesh. "Yes I have plenty of horses to lend to a girl like you! and drivers, and implements!" he went on. "Come over to the ranch and pick out—"

"No, we want to buy—we are not asking charity," she interrupted, a cold horror holding her rigid.

"Do you mean that you are going to clear this land?" he asked cynically.

"Just that," she said. "We came here to establish our home!"

"Then you be careful who you pick for friends," he warned. "It will not be long after you start clearing the land before you realize your foolishness—before you will be anxious for the right kind of a friend—one who can do something for you," and again his eyes appraised her, while she shrank back, cold with shame. "Just call on me whenever you need any help, and I'll keep in touch with you," he added, mounting. "*Adios* for this time." He swept off his hat grandiloquently, bowing to his horse's neck, and rode away. Marjorie stood proudly erect and defiant until he was out of sight, then ran into the tent to clutch Lenore, her whole young body alternately hot and cold with shame and horror.

Far up the river's wraith, in a deeply eroded *barranca* and concealed by sage and greasewood, Jerry found his stolen food and lumber still tied in the bundles in which it had been packed upon the burros. Carefully noting the spot, he turned Cal homeward, and swung along at an easy lope. Topping a steep rise he came suddenly face to face with Wolf Vogel, and slid Cal to a stop, blocking the other's path through the yuccas.

"Say, Wolf," he began without preamble, "have you seen any ghosts lately?"

"Ghosts!" sneered the giant ranchman, and would have laughed, but changed his mind when he met Jerry's eyes.

"Yes, ghosts," insisted Jerry coolly. "Some of 'em are haunting my corner of the valley—tore down my house and vamoosed with the lumber and a lot of other stuff last night! Carried it away up the river. If you see any of 'em I wish you'd let me know. I'm going to kill them and nail their hides over my barn door!"

"You haven't a barn to have a door!" sneered Wolf.

"But I'm going to have one, and a couple of ghosts' hides are just what I need to nail over the door!" Jerry declared, his voice low, cold, even. "I'm going to depend on you to let me know if you see or hear of any of 'em, Wolf,

especially those who have been haunting the girls in Mirage Meadows, just below my place!" he went on, swinging Cal to block the way again as Wolf attempted to pass. "Yes, if any of these 'haunts' get loose in my corner of the valley again, I'm coming straight to you about it! So you had better keep an eye open for them. And there is just one thing more," he continued. "You are rich and all that, and I have only a claim with the foundation of a home on it, but we are alike and even in one way—neither one of us is afraid of the other!"

"You're a fool!" snarled Wolf, showing yellow teeth, "but that's true!"

"Just remember that—and don't forget about the ghosts!" Jerry warned coldly, reining Cal to one side.

"You'll come to your senses some day," snapped Vogel, "you and your friends—" but the glint in Jerry's eyes slowed his tongue, and he rode on.

Riding slowly, confident that the trouble at Marjorie's spring was over, Jerry was approaching the knoll in the grove of Joshuas, when for the second time that day something unusual attracted his attention.

"Ramon!" he whooped, and spurred Cal into a run. A moment later he swung from his saddle and grappled affectionately with a tall, dark

young man in boots, leather chaps, cowhide vest and wide hat.

"Wow! but I'm glad to see you, Ramon, you long, lank, low-down lizard!" Jerry exclaimed.

"Still grazing off loco weed!" Ramon Hampton answered, his words slow, low spoken, a smile lighting his lean, striking face. "I thought you would be needing the horses, so I brought them over," he continued, "but I see you haven't got much done, and no lumber to do any more!"

"You're just in time with that team," Jerry told him. "Help me hitch them to the wagon, and I'll talk while we work."

While the two friends went after the lumber and the stolen food, Jerry told what had happened, and together they discussed it, and talked long of the girls in Mirage Meadows. When at last the lumber was piled again in its rightful place, and the boxes of food had been returned to the shelter from which they had been stolen, the two friends rustled a meal, and then set off on horseback to call upon Marjorie and Lenore.

The girls welcomed them, masking with their gaiety the thoughts of the morning which refused to be banished. To both of them Ramon was a new and interesting personality. They watched his black eyes flash with his white, even teeth when he smiled, and noted his unhurried, yet quick

movements which suggested panther strength. They knew he was a gentleman, they could feel that; and he was educated, well read. And to him they were symbols of another world—but it was Lenore who drew and held his eyes, for in her lily-like fairness she was the exact opposite of the strong heavy-featured squaws of the Triangle Bar Ranch and the mountains beyond it. Always direct, Ramon established himself beside Lenore, and Marjorie took the opportunity to ask Jerry to look at the spring.

"The water is getting lower every day!" she explained when they were out of earshot. "I thought at first it—"

"Marjorie," he interrupted, "I hate to have to tell you—but this spring goes dry every summer!"

"Goes dry!" she repeated, her eyes wide. "Why, Mr. Blair said—"

"He told you it was a living spring, of course," he interrupted again. "He has told others that. When I met you that first day it was already too late for me to warn you. And I hated to—"

"I know," she broke in gently, and then: "But what are we to do? We can't live without water."

"You'll have to get a couple of barrels, and haul it from Mirage Station. Major West sells it for ten cents a barrel."

"That is reasonable—but I have no horse or wagon."

"I have to go for my water. I'll haul yours at the same time."

"No, I can't let you do so many things for me," she declined. "I must get a horse and—"

"But you will have to let me do it until you get your own outfit," he insisted. "Where your horse is to come from is beyond me. There is not one to be had in this end of the country. Oh, I know!" he enthused, "you can take my team and haul water for me, bringing your own at the same time! That will save me a lot of trouble and time, and make us even!"

"No, not even—I would be more in your debt every day. I can't be a drag on you—I have no right—but oh! I'm thankful!" she exclaimed softly, looking at him in a way that made him feel queer, "so thankful that you are just—just Jerry!" she smiled while he looked at her puzzled. "Tell me about Mr. Hampton," she quickly changed the subject. "Is he an Indian?"

"He is the son of Bryce Hampton, who owns the Triangle Bar Ranch over at the foot of the mountains," he explained. "His father is an educated Englishman, a sort of poetical dreamer who came out here years ago, and became very much interested in the Indians. He married a halfbreed girl, the granddaughter of old Chief Eagle Wing,

and established himself in the cattle business. He has always helped the Indians, and this has kept him comparatively poor.

"Ramon is as white as light. He is one-quarter Indian, and they say that makes him an Indian. I don't know much about that, but I know his mother's mother's people grip his thoughts and imagination. He longs to help them, and the old Chief is always reminding him that they are his people and that they look to him for leadership. His father sent him away to school, and he reads a lot, and is a dreamy sort of chap. On top of that he is a gentleman, and the best horseman I ever saw! When I first came out here I needed a job, and old Bryce Hampton took me in, even though I wasn't good for much, and in spite of the fact that he didn't need me. He is that kind. They have all been mighty good to me," he added, as they started back to the tent beside the partly finished house.

"In a week or ten days our home will be finished," Marjorie glowed when they joined the other two, "and we must have a housewarming! Will you boys come to help us celebrate? We'll surely be ready in two weeks, let's make it two weeks from tonight!" she enthusiastically invited, and when the invitation had been as enthusiastically accepted Jerry and Ramon mounted and jingled away.

Riding slowly, they talked, and Jerry explained Marjorie's need of a horse and some sort of a wagon.

"We can't spare another horse," Ramon regretted.

"I know that," agreed Jerry, "but we've got to figure out a rig for those girls in some way."

"There is that light spring wagon and double burro harness over at the ranch," proposed Ramon. "It belonged to old Beans, the prospector, you remember him. He died at the ranch, and that outfit is there. It doesn't belong to anyone. They can have that."

"And there are plenty of wild burros waiting to be caught and broke!" enthused Jerry. "Say, you camp with me tonight, and help me round up a likely pair tomorrow. I'll break them where the girls can't see or hear me, and then you can bring over the wagon and harness when you come to the party."

"A team of big burros would do very well for them," Ramon considered. "They would be mighty slow on the road, but they could pull those one-horse implements the girls have."

And so the friends rode away toward the hills before dawn the next morning, to return before nightfall "persuading" two tired and balky burros to accompany them. During the days which followed Jerry religiously worked upon the build-

ing of his house in the mornings, but every afternoon was devoted to the breaking and training of the burro team, using a makeshift harness and his heavy wagon. When the great day finally arrived, and Ramon and the wagon with it, the burros were ready. The newly cleaned harness carefully adjusted, Ramon climbed into the little wagon and drove critically about, winding between the desert growths, to return entirely satisfied with the team.

Two girls in pretty white frocks watched in amazement from the doorway of a tiny cabin flanked by giant Joshua trees while two long cowboys approached, driving a team of big-eared "ships" of the American desert. Before the door the equipage stopped amid gay shouts and banter, and Jerry removed his sombrero with a flourish.

"Ladies, gentlemen, and cowhands!" he began. "We meet upon this salubrious occasion to celebrate the triumph of our valley's two fairest—" but Marjorie and Lenore both set upon him, and his "speech" ended. "Anyway," he grinned, when he could be heard, "we're here! These friends of Ramon's sort of insisted upon coming with us. They certainly are a span of the desert's own—and they are looking for a home! Ladies," he bowed, "the carriage waits!" and picking up Lenore, who was beside him, he

lifted her into the seat of the wagon, while Marjorie climbed in from the other side. For a little while the two girls drove gaily about, overflowing with happiness, for the world was kind, was good —and they were young.

"What do they eat?" Lenore wondered when they at last stopped.

"Everything!" promised Jerry.

"Yes, don't go to sleep where they can reach you!" confirmed Ramon, laughing.

"You see these big blocks of wood fastened to these chains," explained Jerry, taking the articles from the wagon. "Well, when you unharness them just snap this chain into the halter ring, and turn them loose. They will find all they need to eat, and you'll not have to worry about them, for they won't go far, dragging the blocks, and you can easily follow the marks of the blocks on the ground when you want to catch them."

"They are affectionate little scamps," added Ramon, "and as soon as they get used to you and to this place, they will stay pretty close to home, and come in once in a while, especially if you give them something to eat now and then."

When the team had been unharnessed and turned loose in the approved way, the laughing quartette went into the tiny house to sit down to the first meal served in the new home. After a gay little supper, tables and chairs were carried

outside, Jerry produced a harmonica, and played —played while he danced, and the four, alone in the wilderness, danced and laughed the hours away.

IV

TRIED AS BY FIRE

WINDING between Joshuas and yuccas across the trackless spaces, Rainbow Ben's long team and creaking wagons marked the pilgrimage of many a settler toward the pioneer's mirage—a home on the land. Pursuing a deathless vision which glowed always in the heaven's for them, or lured on by the sunset glories of the land agent's promises, they came from far communities. But all fell into the kindly, calloused old hands of Rainbow Ben, for he was the only freighter at Mirage Station, and while he hauled their belongings to lonely homesteads, he scolded or encouraged as the spirit moved him.

And the spirit moved him almost daily for weeks, for by the time summer's flaming embrace had consumed the flowers of spring, and left the valley panting, breathless, thirty families were entered upon the great adventure of making dreams come true. Many came with only the barest necessities, others with good outfits, a few with emigrant cars loaded with every necessity, and even a few luxuries. And as the days passed homes began to grow here and there, sometimes

miles apart, nearly always out of sight of neighbors because of the marshalling Joshuas. The silence which spoke with the voice of thunder crept close to the home-shacks, and the spirits danced the thirst dance—but men and women kept their eyes upon the vision, and smiled.

With Jerry's help, Marjorie and Lenore had staked out the first field they planned to clear and cultivate shortly after their arrival,—a plot of about ten acres which some former settler had partially cleared, and upon which neither the brush nor the Joshua trees were large.

With their home completed and themselves comfortably settled in it, with their burro team, wagon, and tools, the girls were at last ready to begin what always seems to the pioneer the real job—clearing the land. In their program Lenore was to be the homemaker—to do the cooking and the gentler tasks of homemaking—while Marjorie in her glorious health and confident young strength was to battle the wastes, and together they would conquer.

But on the day their lonely battle with the dagger-leaved growths began, they went to the field together, and together began work on the first tree. They laughed excitedly as they swung the mattock or shoveled away the soft surface earth. But the fibrous roots of the Joshua spread in a great circle, and the mattock bit less and less, for the

ground beneath the surface was cruelly hard. Wider and wider the circle of their trench grew, deeper and deeper—but hours passed, they staggered with dizziness in the heat, and still the tree stood. After a brief, silent rest, Marjorie grimly picked up the mattock, and attacked the roots where they spread in a mass from the trunk. Doggedly she hacked away, almost choking in the powder-dry dust, but the mattock blade chewed its way deeper and deeper into the mat of roots. Her breath cut her throat like a file, her heart pounded until she felt her chest would burst or her head explode—but the cut went straight down through the mat, clear across one side. Not till then did she stop to wipe the sweat out of her eyes, and while she tried to find breath enough to satisfy her burning lungs, Lenore shoveled the earth and chopped roots out of the trench about the tree. Together they silently went to the other side of the tree, and united their strength in trying to topple it over. It wavered, but stood. Again they shoved—and a third time with all that was in them. The tree gave way slowly at first, and then fell with a little swishing crash.

Their panting breath their only sign of victory, the two sisters looked down at the fallen tree for seconds, minutes, and then went back to the house together to lie flat upon their backs in the shade, while muscles slowly ceased their protesting aches

against the new, violent work, and racing hearts slowed down to normal speed. Two hours later Cal's hoofbeats announced Jerry.

"We had an awful fight today," Marjorie smiled, "but we won! Come and see the tree we grubbed out!"

"You got the idea at last," he said examining the tree, roots, and trench. "Next time just cut down close to the tree on one side, and dig a little around the other. Then fasten a chain as high up as you can, and hook on your burros. Make them work! If they can't pull it over the first time, chop a little more, and pretty soon they can."

"That sounds better," she told him. "I'll try it. But I think I'll do as you advised, and clear away the brush first. That will be easier, and will harden me up for the real grubbing."

"I'm riding into town for the mail and some tobacco," he explained. "Is there anything I can bring you?"

"I—don't know," she hesitated, and then colored as she went on. "Would it be all right if I wore—overalls?" she asked.

"Just the thing," he comfortably advised. "Those outing rigs you girls are wearing are easy on the eyes and all that, but I should think they would be mighty hot and uncomfortable for this sort of work. Why don't you get a suit of over-

alls and jumper, not denim, but that light cotton stuff they make some of 'em out of?"

"Does Major West keep them?" she asked. "Could you select—bring me out a suit?"

"Have Lenore measure you, and I will call at the leading fashion emporium of the metropolis, and make my selection," he grinned, and in a few minutes he was riding away at Cal's favorite lope.

Night had fallen before he returned, but as Jerry rode toward the little house the yellow lamplight shining through the window and open door made him forget the starlit glory of the still evening, filled him with a strange content. Reining Cal to a stop before the door, he called and swung from the saddle. A moment later he delivered a bulky parcel, and a slender package of letters and papers.

After a few minutes of laughing banter he returned to Cal, intending to ride away and thus permit the girls to at once enjoy their letters, but Lenore followed him to where the horse stood waiting, and Marjorie closed the door. Night had spread her jewels with so lavish a hand that the blue heavens blazed with a glory which belongs only to the desert night, and in the veil of half luminous, caressing dusk which was spread over the earth Lenore and Jerry stood close together, and she laughed her low, happy laugh when Cal finally permitted her to pat his nose,

and Jerry accused her of trying to alienate the pinto's affections.

Jerry mounted, and was leaning down, laughing with Lenore while she caressed the big horse, when the door opened and Marjorie stood in the golden lamplight, radiant, laughing, attired in her new regalia. She took a few exuberant dance steps, and while Jerry watched her, vital, alive, calling upon life for life, something swelled in his breast which strained, hurt. After the little dance she came halfway out of the door, looked at the girl and horse and man in the splash of light, paused, calling a laughing "good night" and went inside, closing the door. Jerry looked down at Lenore standing beside his stirrup, her face shining as she looked up, her eyes luminous in the caressing dusk, and after a little he rode slowly homeward, his heart and mind sore perplexed.

Day after day Marjorie worked steadily, chopping with brush hook or axe, grubbing with mattock or China hoe, clearing her field of brush and yuccas in spite of blazing heat and the powder-dry, choking dust.

Jerry had laid out an area of perhaps thirty acres of his own, and from early morning until late at night he chopped away the brush. Hardened by five years in the open, he advanced his lines steadily in his single handed battle with the

desert. When he had perhaps half a dozen acres clear of brush he determined to take out the Joshua trees also, and have a little field actually ready for the plow, have it to look at while he fought on to extend his lines.

Impatient of the delays caused by his necessary housekeeping, nearly desperate because of the sameness and tastelessness of his own cooking, he still worked from sun to sun. One morning just as he felled a Joshua, he looked up to see Lenore drive up to his house in the spring wagon, behind the burro team. She waved, and in a few minutes was beside him.

"I was riding around, and thought I would stop and boss you for a moment," she smiled. "Please don't stop work—I want to see you take out that big one."

When she had seated herself upon a fallen Joshua tree trunk nearby, Jerry set to work. Her eyes kindled as she watched him swing the heavy mattock, the blade biting clear to the handle with every blow. The world seemed wavering in the heat, Jerry's dripping shirt clung to his shoulders and back, outlining the rippling muscles as he swung blow after blow, steadily undermining the tree on one side. This done, he fastened a chain about the tree perhaps six feet from the ground, hooked his waiting team to the other end, spoke low to the horses, they leaned into their collars,

put their weight and strength into the pull, and the tree crashed down.

While he unhooked the chain from the fallen tree, Lenore rose, and waiving a smiling good-by went back to her burro chariot, leaving Jerry puzzled, but doggedly working on in the heat. Noon came, but he worked on for a time, hating even the thought of eating anything he could prepare. But at last he gave his team a little of his store of water, and went into the house. A bowl covered by a napkin on the table by the north window of the shack caught his eye instantly. Wonderingly he removed the napkin, revealing a generous portion of dainty potato salad. He straightened up in surprise, then removed his sombrero and bowed low.

"Welcome! *amigo mio!*" he said solemnly. "Come into our midst and make yourself at home!" he laughed, and caught up the bowl, holding it aloft as if it were a bowl of nectar. "Here's to you, Lenore! Your heart is as beautiful as your—as all the rest of you—God bless you! You've saved my life!"

Day after day he worked, dogged, determined, grimly holding fast to his vision—and he needed every atom of his courage. But one noon he paused in his doorway, amazed. His shack had been cleaned, made to look like a home. His table was set, and from the doorway of the kitchen

partitioned off from the larger general purpose room of the shack, Lenore was smiling at him.

"I really won't bite—I'm not dangerous!" she laughed a little breathlessly. "You needn't be afraid to come in!"

"Singing snakes!" he whooped. "I thought you were an angel!—and I'll swear by the old pink-toed lizard that you are!" and he went in, looking around curiously.

When he found the table set for one, he protested, but Lenore declared that she had had an early lunch, and that in the heat she had no appetite anyway, and served him a dainty meal. Jerry ate in a sort of trance, a very happy trance, and when at last he had finished, he stood in the doorway and rolled a cigarette while Lenore came and stood beside him.

"Please don't scold me," she said, her eyes shining up into his. "Marjorie will not let me work in the field, and keeping house in our little home is so easy that I have too much time to do nothing. You have—"

"Scold you!" he interrupted. "I'm more likely to say my prayers to you!"

"You have done so much more for us than we can ever repay," she began again, "and I do want to help. I want to be useful, not a—a burden," she smiled a little wistfully, her chin trembling. "It

isn't wrong for me to—to come here sometimes—to try to help, is it? You'll let me?"

As he looked at her, so frail and yet so brave, he reached a reverent hand and took hers in his strong brown fingers.

"You could not do anything wrong, *muchachita mia,*" he said huskily.

"Oh! you and Marjorie are so good to me!" she exclaimed softly, holding fast to his hand like the little girl he had called her. "I'm not a child—I'm older than Marjorie—and I will be so much happier helping a little. And—you will be helping me," she went on, while he looked at her wonderingly. "I try not to let Marjorie know, it worries her so, but sometimes the silence seems to come close, it seems to thunder in my ears! I love it here, but days come when I look, and the bigness of it frightens me! But when I see you, you are so strong, you laugh at the desert and the things which terrify me, I can—can lean on your strength and I am not afraid any more!"

And in the days which followed in a blazing procession she came often, drooping in the heat, but smiling. On Sundays both girls came and took full possession of his house, or he went to theirs, and the comradeship of the three, alone in a sea of silence, bound them together with unbreakable chains.

When Marjorie had cleared the brush from her

field and it was piled, ready for burning, she began grubbing the Joshua trees. Day after blazing day she worked, dizzy in the heat, choking in the powdery dust raised by the blows of her mattock, aching from head to foot, but doggedly working on. Her hands blistered cruelly, cramps came to torture her knuckles, wrists, elbows, shoulders, the muscles of her arms seemed to shriek a protest at every movement, days came when her body cried out that it could not swing the mattock—yet she fought on, uncomplaining.

On a blazing afternoon when the sweeping slopes of the valley wavered crazily in the heat, she paused in her struggle with a particularly difficult tree to try to find air enough for her tortured lungs—and looked up to see Wolf Vogel watching her from his saddle. In the desperate intentness of her struggle with the tree, she had failed to hear the approaching hoofbeats of his horse, muffled as they were by the dry, soft earth. His greeting was civil, but again she felt his eyes travel over her, and she shrank back, weak, panting, dizzy.

"Stop this sort of foolishness," he urged when she did not answer his salutation, riding closer. "A girl can't stand this work—it's a crime to allow a girl like you to try it! What's more she's a fool—all she needs is the right kind of a friend—you know that!" he went on, preparing to dis-

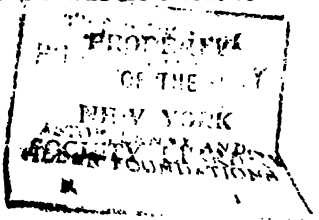
mount. "I'll send some men—" but he stopped and regained his seat, for Marjorie, her eyes blazing, seized her mattock and lifted it to strike.

"This is my field—get off my homestead!" she panted.

"So you're a wildcat!" he leered down at her, and she shrank from his gaze as from contamination. "I've tamed wildcats before," he boasted, his face purple, his eyes closed to slits. "You'll draw in your claws—the time will come when you will beg—yes, beg!" and he wheeled his horse and rode away.

Marjorie watched until the distance swallowed him, then turned, staggering, and threw herself upon the ground, sobbing, her face upon her crossed arms. As the shadows slowly grew longer calmness came back to her, but she could not return to her work, and she lay on the ground in the shade, her eyes searching the limitless blue expanse of the heavens for an answer, for comfort.

And so it was that Jerry found her when he rode into the field upon Cal. Dismounting, he sat down at her side, studying her face, and as he looked his eyes grew troubled. Taking one of her tired, blistered hands he straightened out the work-roughened fingers, and she made no effort to withdraw it.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"How far is it to the ocean, Jerry?" she asked suddenly.

"Between two and three hundred miles," he said, puzzled.

"Is there a river—a river with water in it, anywhere in this end of the world?" she demanded.

"Not near here," he told her. "What started you thinking about oceans and rivers? You seem—"

"Oh—it will take oceans—rivers of water—to make me feel—clean—to wash away that—that —" she interrupted passionately.

"You've been in the sun too much," he said anxiously, laying his hand upon her hot forehead, "you—"

"It isn't that, Jerry," she interrupted again. "You wouldn't—I can't tell you anyway! I just want a whole river of water—clean water!"

"A swim would be mighty fine, wouldn't it," he considered. "Say!" he became enthusiastic, "it is only eighteen miles over the hills to Hot Creek! Would you and Lenore go there with me? We could go in my wagon. There is no road part of the way, but if we started at four o'clock in the morning, say Sunday morning, we could get there by ten. Then we could start home a little while before dark."

"Will you take us? What is it like?" she asked, strangely eager.

"It is a hot creek which flows from a whale of a spring," he explained. "At the spring it is too hot to get into, but it gradually cools off as it flows down the canyon, and you can pick a pool of any temperature that suits you. The Indians go there to be cured of all sorts of things. I'll take you girls, if you'll promise not to work tomorrow."

"I promise," she agreed.

"Come on to the house now," he urged, "you are sick."

When he had helped her to her feet she swayed with dizzy weariness, and leaned against him, but she looked up into his worried eyes and tried to smile. "I'm all right," she insisted.

At his whistle Cal came up, and was too surprised to object when his master ordered him to stand quiet, and then helped a very weak girl into the saddle. "Just sit still, and hold on," he directed Marjorie, a wanly smiling Marjorie, and then addressed Cal as he gripped the bridle. "Cal, you old poison snake," he began, "you step carefully, and no monkey business about it!" As if he understood both his master's words and heart, Cal did his best to act like an ambulance, and carried Marjorie in state to the house and Lenore's loving care.

The stars were still blazing in the sky when Jerry stopped his team in front of the little house

on Sunday morning, but the girls had a heartening breakfast ready, and welcomed him gaily. When sundry bundles had been placed in the wagon, the excited girls climbed aboard, Jerry directing Marjorie to take the driver's seat, Lenore to occupy the place beside her, and establishing himself upon a box in the wagon just behind, where he could direct their course.

While the stars paled they drove through the desert growths of the valley, climbing the northern slope, and the eager desert sun first glimpsed them winding through a pass in the barren hills humping away toward the northwest. Across wide valleys rimmed with bare hills they drove rapidly, to climb sweeping benches, winding between weird buttes of many colors to plunge down the other side of the divide into a land of Titanic rocks, winding gulches, and utter desolation.

At last they stopped upon the brink of an eroded gorge perhaps fifty feet deep, twisting its way across the plain, while in its bottom a stream flashed in the sun, or glowed like dull silver in the deep shadows of overhanging cliffs. Feeding the team and collecting the bundles, Jerry led the way along the rim of the gulch until he found a place where descent was possible, and scrambled down with the girls. The stream reached, they worked their way along its twisting course until a pool spread itself before them, deep in the

shadow of an overhanging cliff of many colors, while into its upper end the stream tumbled in a splashing waterfall. The excited girls tested the water with their hands, and found it just pleasantly warm, and the multi-hued walls of rock echoed their happy exclamations.

"You girls take this pool," Jerry advised. "There is not another human being within many miles, and consequently there is no one to bother you, and nothing to be afraid of. I'll go down stream a little way, and when you are through you can call me."

Two hours later Jerry answered Lenore's husky call, and soon she joined him where, his swim long finished, he sat in the shade.

"It was glorious!" she enthused. "I'm starving for lunch, but I can't make Marjorie come out. She is sitting right under the waterfall, and says it will take all the water in the spring to wash away something, she won't tell me what!"

"All the dirt and heat of the heartbreaking work she has been doing has upset her," suggested Jerry, making a place for her beside him on the ledge.

When Marjorie at last appeared Jerry's blood leaped in his veins, for she was her radiant, glowing self. She had exchanged the suit of khaki breeches and long coat of the morning for a simple frock, brought along, he knew now, in one of the

several bundles. For a moment she laughed down at the two sitting together in the shade, then exuberantly climbed the wall of the gorge to stand upon a rock pinnacle of its summit, etched against the fleckless blue of the sky. A moment she stood, and then held out her arms to the pure breeze drifting gently over the sweeping leagues of desert, and drew in deep, exulting breaths. And as Jerry watched her, graceful, strong, glowing, a great yearning strained within his breast, leaping to answer the call of her.

"If you want any lunch you had better come down here quickly!" called Lenore, and Marjorie came laughing.

"Where is it, I'm starving!" she cried.

After a merry luncheon in the shade of the cliff, the gay trio explored the gnarled and twisted canyon of many-hued walls, then drove homeward through the marshalling glories of the sunset, and on beneath the flashing desert stars to the valley, and to the work of the days which came in a blazing procession.

V

AT THE SHRINE OF FAITH

WHILE one sleepy star watched, a wind romped over the valley's northern rim and came skipping down the sweeping slopes to dance with the dry leaves. Into the sleeping porch of the tiny house in the meadows he came to whisper a message to the drowsing sisters, and his cold breath upon their cheeks startled them awake. They looked at one another questioningly, then to the sleeping desert, and their eyes widened in awed wonder, for as it swept into the east the valley was roofed with glory.

"Fall has come at last!" exclaimed Lenore, breathing exultantly, while from brush pile and thicket sounded the vibrant calls of the desert quail—the call of the open. "Oh! there is life in this air—I can feel it tingling clear to my toes!" she enthused. "I can't stay inside—I must get out with the quail!"

Still strong and beautifully moulded, Marjorie had been pale, worn with the long days of labor in the heat, but as the clear, crisp days marched by the color flamed again in her cheeks. Lenore had smiled always, smiled in spite of cruel heat

and pain—but while she breathed of the wine of the new days her eyes laughed with her lips, and each morning she whistled with the quail, clear, exulting.

Ramon stopped his horse beside Jerry's cabin one afternoon. "I just rode through your clearing. You've done two men's work," he stated quietly, interrupting Jerry's extravagant welcome. "You can't hold that pace," Ramon continued, studying his friend. "You're drawn to fine wire now. You need a little play once in—"

"Say! that play idea *is* easy on the ears!" Jerry laughed, interrupting. "S'pose we give a dance—say tonight—and invite the girls! Sounds locoed—I guess it is,—but—s'pose they'd come?"

"Get your horse and we'll find out," directed Ramon.

When the two found Marjorie at work in her clearing and explained their plan she was instantly enthusiastic.

"There comes Lenore. Hurry and ask her, Jerry, and make a lark of it!" she urged.

For half a breath Jerry looked at her, puzzled, then leaped to Cal's back. Spurring the willing pinto into a run he dashed to meet Lenore, swung from the saddle directly in front of her with the big horse still in full stride, swept off his hat and bowed to the ground while Cal careened on.

"May I escort you to the dance to-night," he began gaily, "if I promise not to shoot—"

"Dance!" she interrupted, breathless from the surprise of his stunt. "Of course I'll go! Where is it to be?"

"At the Flying J Rancho!" he laughed.

"The Flying J!" she enthused as the others came up. "Why! that will be wonderful!"

Ramon and Jerry galloped back, ate an early supper, carried bed, table, and all the simple furnishings of the fairly large general room of the cabin outside, excepting only the chairs, and prepared their "ballroom" for the festal occasion. When all was ready the pair rode away through the cool darkness to the little home in the meadows, where the girls were waiting, radiant in simple frocks. Jerry lifted Lenore to Cal's back, where she sat sideways in the deep saddle, and when Ramon had placed Marjorie upon his horse in the same way, the little cavalcade wound its way through the Joshua trees to the cabin on the knoll.

Jerry needed only his mouth and one hand to transform his harmonica into a fiddle, or a whole orchestra, and while the four danced to his rollicking tunes happy laughter and the shuffling of light feet echoed from the cabin set alone in the night amid the sublime distances. And as the girls at last rode homeward Marjorie sang

with Ramon and Jerry while Lenore whistled an accompaniment, sang and whistled with the joy of life and youth while the flashing desert stars leaned close.

Work upon the two homesteads went ahead steadily. The piled brush, dry as tinder, was ready for burning, and as Marjorie watched the flames leap up from each pile, and her eyes followed the smoke flowing straight up into the still heavens it seemed to her that each one was a triumphant signal of victory. That all might be ready for the plowing and other preparations for planting with the coming of the first rain of winter, both Jerry and Marjorie began fencing their fields.

"These Joshuas make mighty poor excuses for fence posts," explained Jerry while he was discussing the problem with Marjorie, "they rot off in two or three years, but they cost us only time and work—and a homesteader always has more of those two things than he has money!"

"I've noticed that," she smiled, meeting his eyes. "There is one blessed thing about it, though, and that is that we do not have to pretend—we can all be poor together!"

"And we can look forward," he added, holding her gaze with his own, "to being rich to—"

"Rich! Yes, rich!" she interrupted, looking away. "I do not mean in money, but in the things

which really count—home—plenty—contentment —and—" she hesitated.

"And what?" he persisted.

"Oh, everything!" she laughed, coloring, as Lenore joined them.

"I wish you would help me boss Marjorie," Lenore greeted him seriously. "She digs post holes or something like that all day, and doesn't leave the place for weeks at a time. I can't even persuade her to go to town with me when I go for water and other things."

"I dare you to boss me—just try!" laughed Marjorie, teasing, defiance lighting her eyes.

"What shall we make her do?" considered Jerry, looking from Marjorie to Lenore. "There is plenty of room all around to go somewhere in, but the trouble is you never get anywhere. Still, if you think she *could* learn to ride Cal—I don't suppose she would, though," he temporized. "If she wasn't so contrary she might do Cal a great favor—he's as lonesome as a lost soul, and follows me around all day while I am at work."

"I surrender!" flashed Marjorie, her eyes bright, the excited color tingeing her cheeks.

"Cal, you old spotted snake," Jerry turned to the big pinto standing just behind him, "just loan an eye for a blink or two at what's going to ride you! And you remember that she is a pal of

ours, and you're to act like a gentleman, no shenanigans, or I'll skin you alive!"

And as if he understood, sensed his master's thoughts and feelings, Cal stood quietly while Marjorie mounted. When Jerry had shortened the stirrups, he explained the working of the Spanish bit, showed her how to rein the perfectly trained and surprisingly submissive Cal. With Jerry walking beside them, Marjorie rode slowly about the clearing while he schooled her in the cowboy's seat in the saddle and his grip of the horse and it was a glowing Marjorie who finally dismounted at the end of her first lesson.

When Jerry appeared again at the little home in Mirage Meadows, he was leading one of his work horses. When Marjorie had mounted Cal, Jerry sprang upon the bare back of the other horse, and rode beside her. Back and forth they trotted or loped at the range horse's easy gaits, while Jerry tried hard to keep his mind on the schooling of his pupil instead of on that pupil herself. Glorying in the feel of the horse under her, the color rioting in her cheeks, and the light dancing in her eyes, Marjorie and the great horse flashed through the brilliant sunshine like the spirit of youth riding upon life. Lessons followed which became flashing, poignant memories to Jerry, and then came a day when he realized that Marjorie rode as if she and the magnificent pinto were one, and Cal

lunged into his swinging gaits as if he too gloried in his radiant rider.

No more lessons being needed, and having neither an extra saddle nor a fit horse on which to ride with Marjorie, Jerry turned all his attention to his work—for he had thirty acres to fence singlehanded. But Cal joined him in urging Marjorie to ride oftener, and she did, wearing Jerry's leather chaps to guard her from reaching thorns and the rapier points of out-thrusting desert growths, flashing among the scattering Joshuas, a free spirit of the open, exulting, the wind blowing her hair and whipping the color into her cheeks.

On a crisply brilliant November afternoon Jerry was busy at his fencing when Lenore appeared upon the opposite edge of the field, and he went to meet her. "Thursday is Thanksgiving Day," she began, their greeting over, "and Marjorie and I want you to come to dinner with us. I've made two mince pies and—"

"Mince pies! You'll find me on your doorstep Thursday morning!" enthused Jerry, interrupting. "Can I bring anything?"

"Just yourself," she smiled, as they strolled along. "Marjorie and I have not had a real Thanksgiving for—we haven't had a home, or—anyone, since we were, since Marjorie was a little girl and I not much more. But this year we have

a home! It doesn't look—Oh! I know you understand, Jerry, and so, even if everything has to be simple, we are going to be mighty happy!"

Finding a fallen Joshua in a great splash of silver sunlight, they sat down upon its trunk, and while they laughed and talked, Cal, hunting company, found them, joining the group and stretching out his muzzle for attention. When Lenore finally rose to go Jerry called to Cal to follow, and led them both to his barn.

"I'm afraid to let you attempt to ride Cal regularly," he explained while he began saddling the pinto, "he's too big and strong for you. Cal," he addressed the horse, "this is the Mince Pie Fairy, and you just believe me, old hoss, she's too precious for us to let her walk while we're around!" and in a few moments he lifted Lenore into the saddle, his breath coming more quickly as he looked up at her, her eyes alight, and a faint, exotic color tingeing her cheeks. When she had made herself comfortable, Jerry spoke to Cal, and the horse started slowly down the trail to Mirage Meadows, while Jerry walked close at his side.

The Thanksgiving feast to which the three sat down on that day was simple, more simple even that the first Thanksgiving, but not one of the trio would ever forget it. "At all our regular Thanksgivings," Lenore began shyly, "grandfather asked a blessing. This is our first in our own home, and

we—we would like it—will you do it, Jerry?" she asked softly, and while all three bowed their heads in reverence, Jerry's memory reached far back to a God-fearing father and grandfather, and after a little silence he began stumblingly, and went on as best he knew how.

The three lifted eyes bright with something which was not laughter, but after they had turned their attention to the dinner, gay comradeship came to grace their simple board. When the feast had at last been crowned by the mince pie, and Jerry had promised to lay down his life for the cook, or even to wash the dishes for her, she promptly took him up on the last count and set him to work.

While they had no harvest for which to give thanks on that day, harvests loomed large in their minds, for the planting was not far off. Their land was good, but they knew that their crops would not be large. With irrigation wonder yields could be counted upon, but without it the rich land and its tillers, working together, could only do their best with the little moisture brought by the intermittent rains. If by chance the season was unusually wet, if it should bring three or four rains, the crops would be large. But if it were the average for the district the yield per acre would be small, and if dry, there would be no crops.

But old Rainbow Ben was predicting a good year, and Major West was urging the girls to grow any and all the vegetables they could, as well as to make a start with chickens, promising to dispose of everything they could produce at desert prices, for some mines were opening up a score of miles to the east—and the mirage floated close and bright.

Jerry reflected the enthusiasm of the girls, outlining his plan to raise kaffir, rye, barley, and pumpkins, food for the pigs he hoped to buy when it was ready. And thus their first Thanksgiving was not in celebration of a harvest already reaped, but rather they gave thanks at the shrine of faith, the planting soon to begin, and the sounds of joyful celebration rang through the little home, echoing amid the listening distances.

VI

THE RACE AMID THE SHADOWS

MARJORIE stopped Cal upon the summit of a hill jutting queerly out of the flowing slopes.

"Oh! it is a fair land! Our homeland, Cal!" she breathed to the pinto, leaning down and hugging as much of his neck as she could reach around. "I love it all—beginning with you!"

All the way home she rode slowly, loath to leave the sunlight and the summits marshalling their ranks in the sublime distances. It was late afternoon when she at last reached Mirage Meadows, and she rode up to the little home to find Ramon and Lenore sitting together beneath a spreading Joshua, so engrossed in their talk that they failed to hear Cal's approach or to notice her presence until she hailed them. Ramon rode away almost immediately, and while Lenore watched him go, Marjorie looked at her curiously, for a soft, half-wistful shadow darkened the blue of Lenore's eyes—and Marjorie looked away puzzled, wondering if it could be pity.

"He is so different from Jerry," Lenore said softly, "and yet so much like him! He has such

plans—dreams—for helping the Indians—'his people' he calls them. When I sympathized with him, with his plans, it was like opening a flood gate! He has always been so quiet, but this afternoon he talked so beautifully! He said I had helped him, and called me 'the spirit of the desert stars'!" she finished a little breathlessly.

The shortening days brought Ramon often, for there was little work to be done in winter on the Triangle Bar Ranch, lying in a sun-flecked valley in the lap of the mountains, except the day-long riding, looking after the far-straying cattle. He stopped always to see Jerry, and sometimes the two went together to the little home in Mirage Meadows; but he went more frequently alone, for Jerry was still hard at work in his field. There were days when Jerry took Ramon's horse and rode with Marjorie, while Ramon talked eagerly or dreamily with Lenore, but more often Marjorie rode with Ramon. Many of the Triangle Bar cattle ranged over the hills and into the valley, and together they rode leagues to the east and west, while he took note of the brands and the condition of the cattle.

Thus Marjorie explored the valley with Ramon, and discovered many people of the desert, found women on lonely homesteads who had not talked with another of their sex for weeks, sometimes months. And while Ramon talked with the home-

steader, she joined his wife and children—for nearly always there were children—bright-eyed little creatures who scuttled away at her first appearance, but came curiously nearer, to unconditionally surrender at last to the enthusiasm and love she lavished upon them.

Far down the valley queer buttes lifted their multi-hued shapes out of the flowing slopes, and to one of these, raising its red and purple splashed bulk near the railroad, Ramon led the way on a blue and silver afternoon.

"This is Cave Butte," he explained. "Would you like to explore one of the caves?"

"Of course I would," she enthused.

Riding along the base of the cliff which formed one wall of the butte, they found the queer red and purple rock pitted with caves, some large and shallow, their walls painted by nature with weird, splochy colors, others small and dark. Stopping outside a fairly large hole leading back into the rock, they left their horses and entered.

"Watch where you step, and be careful what you touch," warned Ramon, leading the way.

The cave grew narrower, the top and bottom drew so close together as the explorers went on that they had to stoop, and then suddenly the walls drew back, and the rock of the cave's top arched into the blackness. "I would have brought a candle if I had known we were coming here,"

Ramon apologized, "but I have some matches." When he struck a match Marjorie looked about her in excited wonder, for the flickering light showed they were in a high vaulted chamber within the butte, but details of roof and sides were mysteries.

"Several chambers open off this one," Ramon went on, "and one of them is very large, and others open off it, leading back into the butte. I went in perhaps one hundred feet farther than this when I was a boy, and there were still other chambers ahead."

"This is far enough for me," Marjorie shuddered a little. "I was never in a cave before, and it is so dark, and the air smells so—I don't know how to say it, but it makes me feel creepy!"

"The Indian name for this butte," he told her, lighting another match so that she would not stumble as they went out, "means 'the home of evil spirits.' No real Indian will enter one of these caves."

"I'm glad to have explored it a little, but sort of glad it's over," laughed Marjorie as they mounted. "It sounds foolish out here, but being inside that rock made me feel uncanny."

On an evening when Ramon yielded to Jerry's demand that he stay all night, the two jingled down to the home in Mirage Meadows for a visit, and found the sisters deep in a discussion of the

ever-nearing Christmas. "There are people scattered all over this valley," Marjorie continued her argument when the boys had been seated, not many, but there are families in all directions. Many of them never see anyone else, or at least only once in weeks or months. And nearly all of them have children—children who will have no Christmas unless we do something! I've met them, riding around with Ramon, and even if the men can stand the isolation, the women and children can't. It isn't right! I don't know how, but we are going to bring them all together for a regular Christmas!"

"You are trying to rope two critters at once," Jerry protested. "Bringing them together is one thing. Most of them are more or less suspicious of each other, without any reason, except that living alone and having nothing to do with neighbors, or no neighbors at all, seems to make them that way. In spite of that we might bring them together," he considered, "but the 'regular' part of the Christmas pragram—"

"How and where can we bring them together?" interrupted Marjorie. "We'll settle that first."

"Well, there is Honest John's Saloon at Mirage Station," Jerry thought aloud. "That building has not been used for anything since the big mines east of here closed down years ago. Old John had made enough, I guess. Anyway he just sold

out his stock, and left. It has a pretty good floor, and even if the bar is still there, it leaves plenty of room for a big party. Many a one has been held there, for it was a wild place in the old days."

"That is just the place we need," glowed Marjorie, "and Rainbow Ben has a good phonograph and a lot of records. Why! we can have a regular party, with music, and everything! And we can have oodles and heaps of Christmas spirit, and all get acquainted, even if we can't have much else," and the four eagerly planned the valley's Christmas celebration.

Next morning Marjorie rode to Mirage Station to enlist the aid of Major West and his wife, and Rainbow Ben in the scheme. The storekeeper and his comfortable looking wife were pessimistic at first, but Marjorie's determined enthusiasm was irresistible, and soon she and Mrs. West were busy planning details and refreshments, and the older woman's eyes were bright when Marjorie departed to find Rainbow Ben. In his little room in one end of his stable, the old freighter listened to her plan in silence, then rose and peered out the door, shutting it carefully as he turned to face his wondering visitor.

"You gals has shore done a-plenty to this hull valley," he whispered. "Course you kin use what I got. An' say—who air you—you plannin' to have fer Santy Claus?"

"Why, no one—that is—you see we haven't the money to get the candy and such things we would like to have for the children, so we hadn't planned —"

"I ain't never had a chance to be Santy Claus fer anythin' but meules," he interrupted, "an' they is the plumb unsatisfactorist sub-sti-toots fer kids what is! If you'll let me be him, an' promise not to tell one pusson where it come from, I'll— I'll jes' make a bet fer the kids!"

The surprise arranged in secret, Marjorie rode homeward so happy that it seemed to her that even Cal's hoofs entirely spurned the earth. When, her list of delights for the children complete, she consulted Major West, the kindly old storekeeper at first advised her against spending so much money, money he believed she could not afford to spend, and the possession of which, for such a purpose, she could not explain. But at last he promised to order the things, and to keep the whole an absolute secret.

Borne by Cal's winged hoofs, Marjorie carried the news of the Christmas party to far homesteads, and eager children gathered about her, bright-eyed, excited, holding to her hands and even to her chaps while the eyes of thankful mothers brightened, and men silently shook hands with her when she rode away. Far up in the hills she slid Cal to a stop before the door of a home

so lonely that since her first visit to it with Ramon it had almost haunted her.

"Oh, Mrs. Burton," she called gaily, as a slip of a young woman came to the door, a baby in her arms, "we're—" but something in the other's eyes stopped her.

"We're mighty glad to see you, Miss Hope," Mrs. Burton smiled bravely. "Come in."

Marjorie followed silently, while the other, a girl no older than herself, led the way into the largest of the cabin's three rooms. In one corner Jim Burton lay on his bunk, helpless from a wrenched leg and back, the result of a horse he was breaking falling over backward upon him. Though she scarcely knew either of them, Marjorie sat down beside the bunk, offering her sympathy and help, and listening to the story of the accident.

"Try to buck up Nettie—she needs you," whispered the tortured man on the bunk when his wife had excused herself to go to the kitchen to look at her baking. "We've got food enough, and liniment, and I'll be all right in a week or two. But it's powerful lonesome for Nettie here—an' Christmas only three days off! I ordered some stuff for a surprise for her. It'll come to Mirage in time, but I can't get it. That hurts the worst. Nettie sort of needs—a little Christmas!"

"I'll bring it out for you!" Marjorie promised

instantly, and the thanks she read in the man's eyes were more than a reward to her, and she hurried into the kitchen to "buck up" Nettie with her understanding sympathy.

On the morning of the day before Christmas, Jerry and Ramon built a support for the cedar they had cut in the far mountains, and set up the Christmas tree in the back part of the one-time saloon, while Marjorie and Lenore made wreaths of the ashy-silver desert holly and the sprays of cedar the boys had brought. When the old room had been decorated from end to end, and the tree wound with garlands of strung popcorn and bright berries, and every candle was in place, Ramon and Jerry fashioned a curtain before the tree from sheets loaned by Mrs. West, while that matron and the two girls began the preparation of glistening piles of popcorn balls. When the boxes containing the special surprises for the children came, Marjorie had given the one containing the Christmas tree trimmings into the care of Mrs. West, and placed the others in her wagon, and driven away—but safely out of sight of Mirage Station old Rainbow Ben was waiting to take the things. And while Marjorie and the others worked at the old saloon or in Mrs. West's kitchen, old Rainbow made his own preparations behind the locked door of his little room in the end of his stable, his calloused, knotty hands fum-

bling string and ribbon, his old voice directing in a sing-song monotone. Fussing happily over his little surprise, he gloated over the fact that he was going to do just what he had always wanted to do, and no one but Marjorie would ever know. They would know that he acted as Santa Claus at the party, but never that he had been sentimental enough to provide the gifts for the children—other people's children.

Noon had scarcely passed before teams drawing wagons loaded with excited children and thankful parents were headed toward Mirage Station. Burros made up some of the teams, others were horses, but in every wagon rode a man and a woman, and at least one child, sometimes five or six. From east and west and north and south they came, winding along the half-defined roads, piloted by the spirit of Christmas. It was late afternoon before everything was ready, and Ramon and Jerry drove rapidly homeward with Lenore, to dress for the party, while Marjorie waited to attend to the inevitable last touches, with Cal ready to carry her home. The boys left Lenore at her home, and, promising to be on time to take the girls to the party, they drove on to Jerry's cabin.

Marjorie was mounting when the overloaded mail train, hours late, rumbled to a stop at Mirage Station. Tired as she was, memory of the

Burtons, of the surprise Jim Burton had ordered for his wife, held her until Major West had sorted the mail.

"Here's them packages o' Burton's you been lookin' for," he told her, holding up two bulky packages, and looking at her over the tops of his spectacles. "Too bad they come too plumb late for—" he started on, but Marjorie interrupted, silenced his protest with her determined haste, tied the bundles back of her saddle, rode out of the straggling town at Cal's swinging lope, and took the lonely trail for the Burtons' homestead.

Marjorie tried to be casual when she delivered the bundles at the lonely home, but after the man on the bunk had taken her hand in both his own, and gripped it silently, and she had seen the sunrise in the eyes of his girl wife, she had hurried away, followed by their Christmas wishes, her soul rich with its reward. Cal breezed the miles smoothly, and Marjorie rode on through the gathering dusk, only half seeing the plain flowing past.

But a change in Cal's gait roused her. She noticed that his ears were pointed forward, and she looked ahead—a rider was approaching in the trail. She watched him a moment, then gripped the reins more firmly, settled herself more securely in the saddle as she rode on, her heart pounding, for she saw him loose his *riata,*

realized that he was studying her closely. The shadows baffled her eyes, but she was sure that she had never seen this rider before—sure that he was neither an Indian or a regular white rider—she did not know why, but she knew he was a breed. A trail opened to the left, and her heart gave thanks. But just as she started to swing Cal into it her searching eyes noted a figure, motionless in the distant shadows—a rider blocking the way, a rider mounted upon a great black horse.

Her heart cold within her breast, she looked to the right. A third rider was swinging along through the yuccas at an angle which would bring him into the trail just about where she would meet the one approaching in front. Believing flight her only chance, she tried to swing Cal about—but the big range horse, veteran of many battles with his kind, refused to heed the bit. She could feel him gathering himself as if for a supreme, primal charge, and she settled herself low in the saddle, leaning forward—and Cal leaped straight for the approaching rider and his horse, charging with all the power of his great heart and muscles, his hoofs pounding a thundering defiance. Yards, rods flashed by—straight on charged Cal, head low, outstretched, teeth bared. Clinging to his back, bracing herself against the shock of impact when the two horses

should crash together, Marjorie shut her eyes, strangely calm as she gave herself into the keeping of the great horse.

The advancing rider attempted to force his horse to remain in the trail, but when Cal reached gleaming fangs for his throat, the cayuse leaped away, squealing horribly from slashing spurs and fright. But even as the terrified broncho leaped from the trail, the rider swiftly approaching from the right swung his arm easily, and a *riata* sailed smoothly, evenly through the dusk.

The loop poised a moment above the girl—then dropped over her. But as the rider took his turns about his saddle horn, the noose drew taut about the high pommel and cantle of Marjorie's saddle, binding only her hips, holding her more firmly in her seat and Cal's furious lunge snapped the cinch of the breed's saddle, and hurled saddle and rider to the ground.

Free except for the trailing rope, Cal leaped away. The first rider wheeled his horse furiously, and came pounding behind in the trial, spuring mercilessly, his *riata* swinging, ready. Marjorie glanced to the left. No longer was the great black horse motionless. Approaching at an angle, an angle which might bring him into the trail ahead of her, the black was running like a demon. With one hand Marjorie slipped the *riata's* noose over her head and dropped the

rope. On thundered Cal. She knew he was gaining on the rider behind. But that other—the black seemed the demon of speed—he was gaining!

"Oh, Cal! Cal!" she half-soobed. "Run! Run for the honor of the desert—for me—for—Jerry!"

And as his master would have done, Cal gave all that was in him. Fascinated, Marjorie watched the black, only half visible in the shadows. A little hope came into her heart. Cal was gaining! Then the trail swung to the left! Again the unfair advantage was with the flying demon of night, but on through the deepening shadows thundered Cal.

VII

A DESERT SANTA CLAUS

LIKE PAGES in golden livery bearing the gossamer folds of a scarlet train, cloudlets by files and companies followed the majestic sun into his mysterious chamber of rest whose other door is tomorrow, and the shadows came hurrying to hide the ugliness of Mirage station. The irregular street was half filled with wagons, burros, and horses, for like thirsty cattle drifting to a waterhole, the teams had been arriving for an hour or more—the homesteaders of the valley, a few miners from the new workings to the east, and jingling cowboys from far ranges, for the news of the Christmas party had drifted far in the smoke of desert camp fires. The jovial, half-wild jokes of the riders and miners danced through the shadows in company with the flickering lights of the cook fires, built here and there beside the road, each marking the spot where supper was being prepared in the open for a family living so far away that they must camp that evening close by, in order to be in time for the celebration.

In the little home in Mirage Meadows Lenore began the preparation of the evening meal,

but as the minutes grew into half an hour without bringing Marjorie, she left the tiny kitchen to go outside into the darkening shadows to listen for Cal's expected hoofbeats—but only silence answered her questioning ears. Half impatient and a little worried she went into the house, lay down for few moments' rest, and then began making her toilet for the evening. As she dressed her earlier impatience became insistent, torturing anxiety, and when at last she was ready, she went again to the door.

Night held the little house in a close embrace, and the silence spoke with the voice of thunder. Shivering, Lenore was turning back, when she paused, ran a little way into the night, leaning forward, straining. A muffled pounding, faint, indistinct, far away, cheated the thundering silence. For moments she did not breathe—the silence choked the sound. Then it came again, plainer, growing magically into the rhythmic pounding of flying hoofs. Running into the house, she flung the door wide and brought the lamp, the yellow light flowing out to form a pool of life in the dead blackness.

And while she stood, tense, nerveless, Cal flashed into the spreading pool of light, and stopped, his great muscles quivering, his head hung low, his breath whistling through his flaring nostrils. Running for the honor of the

desert — for Marjorie — for Jerry — he had matched his heart against spur and cruel quirt— against the demons of darkness—and he had won. Before Lenore could speak, Marjorie slid from the saddle, and throwing her arms about Cal's neck she drew his head close to her breast.

"Oh, Cal! Cal!" she sobbed, and then became incoherent. "Go home! Go quickly!" she recovered herself after a moment and ordered. "Find Jerry!" she commanded, starting him up the well worn trail to the house on the knoll, and the great pinto, riderless, quivering from exhaustion, went quickly, while Marjorie rushed inside to claim the security of bolted doors and the comfort of Lenore's arms.

Having finished both their supper and their preparations for the party, Jerry and Ramon talked quietly while they waited for the coming of the time to start. Jerry's team, hitched to his wagon, was tied to a Joshua near the cabin door, ready. Into the wagon box the boys piled Jerry's mattress, blankets and pillows, fashioning these, with the aid of boards, into comfortably cushioned seat for the girls.

As time wore on and Cal did not appear, to be unsaddled and turned loose for the night, wonder as to what was delaying Marjorie, and then anxiety, indefinable, but real, crept into their hearts and voices.

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"It's nearly time to—" Jerry began, when Ramon interrupted.

"Be quiet a moment, I think I hear him," he said. "Yes, he's coming, but his gait is queer!"

Jerry brought his lantern, and lit it. The rapid, stumbling hoofbeats drew nearer, and Cal reeled to a stop before them, reaching his muzzle to Jerry. The two veteran riders of the desert looked at the reeking, quivering horse, listened to his rasping breath—and his message was as plain to them as if he had spoken it.

"Your horse is here," Jerry spoke with the desert man's cold, flashing calm. "Get your gun, and go to the girls! I'll attend to Cal, then I'll come!"

A few moments later Ramon was in the saddle and riding, riding like his kind, who never have to be told to hurry when there is reason to ride. Jerry slipped saddle and bridle off Cal, and led him into the little barn. Bringing water in a basin he washed the horse's dry and dusty mouth, his nostrils, his head, then began rubbing his quivering, heaving body.

"I know you got her home safe, Cal," he said, stroking the pinto's dripping neck. "If they had—gotten her, you would have come straight home! Cayuses don't grow that can trap you, old hoss, I've seen you fight! And I know what you gave, Cal, gave all that was in you, to save

a girl you love!" and Cal turned his big head, nosing his master, and nickering pantingly.

Ramon hailed as he approached the house in Mirage Meadows, to let the girls know who he was, and when Lenore had answered him, telling him that Marjorie was safe, he rode beneath a giant Joshua, and sat his horse, motionless, one with the night, but watching, ready. When Jerry drove up Ramon dismounted, relieved his friend's anxiety, and the two decided that as none of the pursuers had appeared, they had given up the chase. In a few minutes Lenore called them inside, and they found the girls ready. Marjorie was not as pale as Lenore, even though she was paler than they had ever seen her, but her eyes flashed brighter with determination while she insisted that she was able to go the party, that nothing could make her desert the children.

"Tell us just what happened, before we start," insisted Jerry, and while she told them briefly of the race and of Cal's victory the faces of the two men became granite, their eyes cold, steady.

"Didn't you recognize any of them?" Ramon asked, when she had finished.

"I could only see the face of one, the one who was in the trail in front of me," she told them, "and I have never seen him before. I don't know—"

"Well, we know!" interrupted Jerry. "I warned—"

"You boys must promise me one thing," Marjorie interrupted, seizing a hand of each one as they stood before her. "This is Christmas Eve! No—no shooting must occur as a result of—on account of what I—we have tried to do this Christmas!"

"You must promise us never to ride such distances alone," Jerry insisted. "If Cal had come home without you, if they had succeded, why! we probably never could have found you! proved anything! You would simply have disappeared.

When the girls were comfortable in the wagon, Jerry drove rapidly toward Mirage Station, while Ramon rode beside the wheel, galloped ahead, or dropped behind if anything aroused his suspicions in that direction. The fresh team trotted briskly, and the rattling wagon bumped quickly over the miles.

The night was cold, and the old hall began to fill early with eager children and their parents. On improvised benches the expectant children sat in rows, a queer restraint keeping them quiet, their eyes glued to the curtain hiding the mysteries in the back of the room. Mrs. West and some of the other women bustled about, making the final preparations, while the settlers waited

quietly. About the door cowboys and miners formed a lively group.

When Marjorie and Lenore appeared at the door the cowboys pulled off their sombreros and sent a wild "whoo-pee" ringing across the silent wastes, and while Marjorie walked down the long, dingy room, restraint fled. Fathers and mothers leaned toward her, smiling, calling greetings, and the children upset their benches in their childish stampede to surround her, dancing, clinging to her hands and skirts. As she stood among them, looking down into their bright, eager faces, the weariness and pallor left her cheeks, and she became radiant, laughing with them while she gathered them about her in a circle of many rows, all sitting on the floor.

Lenore went to the phonograph, and put on a record—one of several bought with old Rainbow Ben's donation—and children, mothers, fathers, cowboys and miners became reverently silent as the golden voice of a world famed soprano filled the dingy desert room—a voice lifted upon this night in its full glory in the simple words and measures of an old Christmas hymn. The record came to an end, but the magic of the words held them all. Lenore placed another in the machine. Once more the golden voice filled the old room—and had the singer been standing before them none would have seen her, save perhaps the chil-

dren for she sang "Home, Sweet Home"—sang to their hearts.

When the song had at last died away Marjorie told the children grouped about her the story of that first Christmas, told it simply, while they listened wide-eyed, breathless, and fathers and mothers, tanned riders and rough hardrock men leaned forward, thankful, reverent. The story finished, Lenore placed another record on the machine, and magically the room thrilled with joy, vibrant with the voices of children, a children's chorus singing a Christmas Carol—and if some eyes were bright with tears they were happy tears.

Behind the curtain Jerry and Ramon were lighting the candles on the tree, and Marjorie sent the children scampering back to their seats. When the curtain was at last drawn back, a mystic silence gripped those in the room for a time. The children looked at the cedar, brilliant with candles and simple decorations, looked with their eyes bulging—and while the others looked, many were seeing other trees, other faces, journeying amid other times, but suddenly those crowding the old barroom turned inquiring, smiling faces toward the door, and the children jumped up, transfigured, for a musical jingling of bells filled the night.

"Here comes Santa Claus!" exclaimed Mar-

jorie, and a wondering cowboy flung open the door wide.

"Gee! Gee! You lop-eared son o' Satan!" a voice rasped above the music of the bells, and the rider at the door sat down weakly, for he had recognized Rainbow Ben's voice, and knew that the jingling bells were the hame bells of his leaders, and the thought of Rainbow Ben as Santa Claus overcame him for a moment.

"Haw there! Gee! Haw a leetle!" bells and voice came closer, and then through the open door marched a solemn, wondering mule! A mule bearing a heaped up pack with the bells fastened to it! And behind the mule tramped "Santa Claus," a true Santa Claus of the desert! His scraggy beard pieced out with cotton, old Rainbow wore a mask over the upper part of his face, and his long white hair hung down below a new and spreading sombrero. His boots and overalls were desert regulation. But his coat was a work of art, fashioned by his own calloused hands, skilled like the true desert hands they were in needlework, from a bright red blanket, and decorated here and there by bunches of cotton snow.

Straight up the aisle he marched behind his mule, and suddenly the miners and riders threatened to tear off the roof with their cheers, for their keen eyes had noted his old jaws working as usual, and they knew that "Santa Claus" was

"chawin' tobaccy!" While the howls of glee still shook the building, Rainbow stopped his mule in front of the tree, and turned to face the children. He started to speak, gulped, looked about him wildly, then swallowed—swallowed twice! But he was serene and unperturbed as he looked at the yelling riders, and quiet came back at last.

"Evenin', folks," he addressed them. "Sort o' s'prised to see me, hey! Well, I usen to have trouble gittin' around the desert till I traded my reindeers for a pack mule! I figgered that some o' you leetle rep-tiles might git too plumb ornery if I didn't come around to sort o' look ye over about once in so often! Yes, I was so worried about ye, that I swapped my reindeers for this meule, an' b'hickory! I got here this time! But I got a long trail ahead, I got to hurry," he went on, unfastening the mule's pack, "so you come on an' help me!" he invited, and no second invitation was necessary. Out of the pack came red apples; big and shiny, and fancy gauze stockings stuffed with candy and tied with bright ribbons. An avalanche of joy swept over the excited children crowding around the mule.

"Well, I'm mighty glad to have met up with you folks at last," he said, his old eyes bright as he looked into the happy young faces lifted to him, "but I got to be moseyin' along, got lots to

do tonight and he reached into his hip pocket, withdrew his trusty plug of Mule Skinner's Delight, studied it for a moment, bit off a generous chew, and put the plug away. "Wake up, you rep-tile hearted son o' sin!" he addressed the mule, giving him a resounding slap in the ribs, and through an aisle which opened more in deference to the mule than to "Santa Claus," Rainbow Ben followed his long-eared friend out into the night, the bells jingling a merry Christmas to all.

The happy children gathered in a corner with their apples, candy, and pop-corn balls distributed by Mrs. West and Lenore, and the benches and chairs were arranged against the wall, the phonograph began playing a dance record, and immediately the floor was filled with swaying, gliding, laughing couples. The phonograph played and played, waltz, one-step, march, anything that was lively, and the old building swayed and trembled beneath gliding, jigging, or stamping feet.

There were five men to every girl, and the girls ranged in age from twelve to sixty, and every girl was a belle. Old men, young men, and all sorts in between crowded the floor, the cowboys and miners dancing together when no better partners could be found, reels and "country dances" followed waltzes and one-steps in breathless succession. And every dance was a "tag

dance," for with girls so scarce the men had no intention of allowing one of their number to monopolize any girl for a whole dance. Marjorie and Lenore danced and danced, whirled from one brawny partner to another, and the joy bells of laughter rang clear to the desert stars.

When the very young children could no longer keep awake, thoughtful mothers wrapped them in blankets and—but "girls" were too scarce to be allowed to waste time caring for even their own children—and the sleeping tots, rolled in blankets, were placed in a long row behind the bar, safe from harm, but near enough for their mothers to make sure by an occasional peek.

Midnight came amid hilarious shouting of "Merry Christmas!" Coffee was made in great pots, and the cakes brought by the women were cut. Refreshments over, all began preparations for the long drives homeward, some so long that the sun would be high before home was reached.

When Jerry and Lenore were ready to start, he left Ramon to hold his team while he went in search of Marjorie. In the center of a group he found her, radiant laughing, and he stopped to watch. Women and children put their arms around her, helping to express feelings and thoughts their lips could not form into words. And then came the men, awkwardly extending work-roughened hands, sometimes saying a word

or two, but nearly always just looking. At last he took his place at the end of the line. But when his turn finally came, Marjorie gripped his arm with both her hands.

"Jerry!" she whispered, "my feet are worn clear off! I can't walk—but—I feel—I am so happy I know I can fly!"

"Hold on to me, and fly sort of low," he laughed.

Lenore was in the wagon, comfortably seated among the blankets and pillows, and Jerry picked up Marjorie, too tired to even make a pretense of resisting, and laid her upon the mattress, her head in Lenore's lap. Drawing the blankets warmly about them both, he drove homeward, with Ramon riding alongside.

VIII

THE PLANTING AND THEN—

RIVERS of golden lightning flowed across the black void of the eastern horizon on New Year's Eve, while an excited expectance seemed to ruffle the breast of the desert. Jerry watched with Marjorie and Lenore in Mirage Meadows, awed by the silent glory of the heavenly fire. The cold wind sweeping toward the mountains bore a message, a promise of new life. Cattle drifted uneasily, and the tiny folk of the desert were busy, as with final preparations for some long expected event.

All day the clouds had been sailing singly and by squadrons, sailing low like overloaded treasure galleons. The first fleets ran aground upon the mountains, and the others following crashed into them and into each other until the valley was roofed with black to the end of sight in the east, where flowed the golden rivers of light.

"That lightning is so far away we can't even hear the thunder," mused Jerry, "but if it swings this way it will come so fast we can't dodge."

"And we'll get our rain! our first rain!" enthused Marjorie excitedly.

"Yes, and my guess is that we are likely to get wet any minute," Jerry answered. "I'm going to drift home," and finding Cal, he mouted and galloped away.

For an hour the lightning played about the eastern horizon, and then without warning a river of light divided the heavens, flowing straight up the valley, and a crash shook the world. Again the golden stream flashed the length of the valley, tumbling to the earth in a cascade of glory, and then the rumbling thunder ripped wide the night's suffocating blanket, and the rain came in splashing, pounding streams.

All night the overloaded galleons poured their treasure upon the thirsty land. The sun looked into the valley next morning and found them riding high and light, and when he sent happy beams to wish them *bon voyage* they spread their sails of rose, scarlet, and gold and laid their courses for some mystic port in the heavens far beyond the mountains.

"How soon can I begin plowing," Marjorie eagerly demanded as soon as Jerry appeared.

"In a few days," he promised.

When Jerry announced that the land was ripe for breaking the burros were harnessed, hooked to the plow, and driven into the field. Marjorie

took the plow handles, and Lenore the lines. Color rioted in Marjorie's cheeks, and even Lenore's glowed faintly, and excitement lighted the eyes of both girls.

"Hadn't I better start it for you? one furrow will give you something to follow," suggested Jerry.

"We want to turn the first furrow—this is one of the things we've worked so long for!" insisted Marjorie.

"Crank up your tractor, then," laughed Jerry, and Lenore "cranked up."

When the burros finally woke up and started slowly, the plow-point bit into the soil, and the draft of the plow carried it down to its proper depth—and then the burros stopped, looking back inquiringly at this small thing which seemed so hard to pull.

Lenore swung her whip, Marjorie gripped the plow handles, and when the burros started the plow seemed to jump, it left the furrow so quickly, and slid and bumped along the surface.

"That's right, laugh now, while it's funny!" advised Jerry, joining the merriment of the sisters.

The team was backed and the plow dragged into place for a new start. The burros started more smoothly, and Marjorie, fighting the plow handles, tried hard to obey Jerry's instructions, to follow his constant coaching—and the furrow

grew a foot, a yard, a rod, half a dozen rods long. When the burros stopped this time Marjorie was panting, but triumphant, as she looked back over the line of turned-up earth.

"There is one thing you must be mighty careful about," cautioned Jerry wickedly. "If you push so hard on the plow handles you are likely to injure the team by running over them!"

"If I didn't need you around here for a little while, I'd send you home for that!" laughed Marjorie, and so the lesson and the breaking of the new land progressed.

The suns which came to make each hurrying day brilliant watched Jerry turning the virgin soil of his field, plodding behind his team hour after hour, the moist, rich earth flowing from the mouldboard of his plow filling him with ever-growing content. And the same suns watched while the two sisters broke the new soil of their field, broke it slowly, laboriously with their little plow and burro team—and each sun noted their progress, for though it was heartbreakingly slow, there was always progress to be recorded.

In spite of their determination and constant work, it took the sisters longer to plow their ten acres than it did Jerry to break his thirty—but at last the land was plowed. Then followed days of harrowing, of transforming the new land into a seed bed. Jerry harrowed up and down and

across his field, and then went over the whole process, while Marjorie and Lenore had to do their best with a little walking cultivator, just the thing for tilling growing crops in rows, but heartbreakingly slow in an open field. They were but half done when Jerry was through, and what they had finished far from satisfied them. Then came a morning when they paused upon the edge of their field, amazed. From fence to fence the crumbly soil stretched, level, smooth, fine as a garden and ready for planting.

Half an hour later the sisters roused a tired, sleepy, and protesting Jerry, and when he finally got into his clothes and appeared in his doorway they eyed him militantly for a moment.

"What do you mean by trespassing upon our property?" demanded Marjorie in mock severity.

"Trespassing!" he grinned. "Why! you woke me up! I can't have been trespassing, unless I walked in my sleep!"

"You did! You must have walked all night! And we're never going to forgive you, Jerry, never!" and Marjorie smiled at him a moment, a smile and look that made him feel a little dizzy, and both girls gaily pounced upon him, and pulled him down to a seat between them on the doorstep, where the three were soon eagerly discussing the planting.

Their field laid out in plots, Marjorie and

Lenore happily followed one-row planter and drill, each plot receiving its allotment of seed in long rows, while Jerry planted his kaffir, pumpkins, and the vegetables he planned to grow for his own use, and sowed his rye and barley, all three tired, but glorying in measuring another step toward the bright goal of a home on the land.

IX

THE WINGED LEGIONS OF FAMINE

THE WARM sunlight lay on the sleeping wastes like a Madonna's benediction. Weighted with promise, the luminous air drifted lazily in soft breezes. The world-old miracle of life, new life, stirred within the breast of the desert, and she awoke, smiling. In field and sweeping waste tiny green shoots forced their way through the earth to look into the limitless blue of the heavens.

The kaffir corn was first to appear in Marjorie's field, having been planted days before the vegetables, and after the excitement of the discovery of the first up-pushing leaf had abated, the girls watched while tiny green signals of victory lifted themselves to mark the long rows. But the ground which will grow good crops will grow wild flowers and weeds without number, and with the corn came hundreds and thousands of tiny green invaders. Jerry came to arrange a hitch which would permit of the use of Marjorie's walking cultivator with one burro, so that she could cultivate between the rows, and rid the land of weedy growths and save all the moisture and fertility for her crop.

Through the warm, lengthening days Marjorie plodded up and down the rows, doing her best to keep the burro going steadily, and carefully guiding the cultivator. The steady work was too hard for a single burro, so she used one of her span in the morning, and the other in the afternoon, and thus kept up with the hurrying weeds. Turnips, beets, onions and the other vegetables came along in the order of their planting, and with the passing of every day Marjorie found her field of operations expanding until it comprised the entire cleared and planted plot.

Up and down the long rows of his field Jerry marched, one of his strong, well broken range horses walking rapidly, and the cultivator leaving the land mellow and bright, and he worked on through the days with a song in his heart.

Rains came to make more vivid the green of the growing things, and while the lightning played about the far peaks of the west and the storms beat down upon the naked slopes, the spirits of the mountains sent a great flood upon the land. It spread far over the dead plain above the lava hill spanning the valley, piled up in murky waves to roar through the canyon where the dead river's ghost wandered, and then rushed on, transforming the dry wash of the river's wraith into a turbid, foaming torrent for the span of a night and a day, to leave it again, vacant, empty.

But in the fields of Marjorie and Jerry, the rain was a blessing. The flood was far away. And they returned to their cultivating, happier, more thankful, serene in their belief that their sacrifices upon the altar of hope had not been offered in vain. And when once more the rain-gods poured forth their treasure upon the desert, and the floods rumbled through the canyon in the lava hill, life quickened in the fields and homes upon the sweeping slopes of the valley, and songs of joy rose from thankful hearts.

Here and there a flower flashed back its brilliant heart to the sun, and then suddenly the desert sowed the limitless spaces with countless blooms. Daisies and wild hollyhocks danced in companies, purple sage dotted the land as with bits of the fathomless heavens, while Indian Paint Brush came with its flaming tassels to light happy groups of sage. Here and there loco weed waved its blue flowers, and temptingly displayed its balloon-like pods of lavender, while poppies of wine and lavender stood at attention by squads and battalions, and the cactus flashed the wild colors of her blooms.

For weeks the rush of planting held Ramon at the Triangle Bar, and then equally important duty sent him riding, riding from sun to sun. Through the winter the cattle had strayed far, and the riders of every outfit were swinging over

the endless leagues, noting brands, tallying, preparing for the round-up. And so Ramon came again to the valley. Sometimes he rode alone through the marshalling distances, sometimes he led Cal to Mirage Meadows, and Marjorie rode with him over the flower-embroidered slopes, laughing, radiant, the glory of her a symbol of the new life all about.

But Marjorie's days with Ramon and Cal were few, for her growing things demanded attention. The corn grew to her knees, her waist, and all the rest hurried to fulfill their destiny.

While the girls worked happily amid the bright foliage of their growing crops, believing the lush leaves and green stems meant that their home on land was to be real, that they were winning, the first scouts of the age-old legions of famine hopped and flew here and there. But Marjorie and Lenore were too happy, too overflowing with thanksgiving to begrudge any one of Nature's tiny creatures its bread of life, and when they noticed a grasshopper they got out of his way, laughing and shivering a little at the thought of touching him.

But when they came by scores the girls drove them away with hoe or some other tool from the spot where they happened to be working, and went on with what they were doing, wishing that Nature had not chosen to have so many such

children, but the mirage was drifting low, very low and close—and their hearts reached yearningly toward it.

When the cattle began drifting across the valley from the low hills of the north, Jerry watched them go day by day, but stuck doggedly to his work—then arose one morning to find one end of his field alive—alive with a life as gray as death—that meant death to all growing life. For an hour he watched, utterly helpless, and the sombre horde by legions and scores of legions swept on into the field, numberless, leaving scarred and stripped stalks and bare ground where only the day before his green hopes had waved so brightly in the shimmering sunlight.

Turning his back upon the grave of his year of heartbreaking labor, he put Cal and the other horses into the barn, and stopped every chink and crack save two openings high up, so that they might have air, and yet be free from the fluttering hordes. Then he tightly closed his house, and walked down the trail to Mirage Meadows, kicking and trampling the swarming insects infesting the way.

Approaching the little home in the desert meadow his heart strained with a great pain at sight of two pale faces pressed close to a windowpane, their dazed, frightened eyes watching while the gray blanket of desolation spread over their

hard won field. Grasshoppers bumped against siding, doors, and windows of the little house, and lay in heaps upon the porch. Clearing a space before the door with a sweep of his boot, Jerry entered quickly, and shut the door, while both girls turned to him, reaching hands to take his —for comfort, and to offer sympathy too deep to find expression in words.

"Is this the—the end?" Lenore asked softly, unshed tears glistening in her eyes.

"Not the end, Lenore," Jerry told her, his voice a little husky in spite of his effort at control, "but it means a new beginning! These grasshoppers don't come every year. Next year we might make a winning. But I can't—haven't enough money to carry me through until the time comes to harvest another crop."

"Neither have we," Marjorie told him with equal frankness.

"The Land Office will give us five months leave of absence from our homesteads," he said, "and perhaps we can make enough to—come back and start again. I haven't figured out any plan yet, but I suppose I'll go—"

"Don't say that yet," interrupted Marjorie. "We may have to go—I can't see any other way—but it means retreating! We must not retreat until—until—"

"We won't!" Jerry said for all three, and

throwing an arm about the shoulders of the girl on each side of him, he drew them close, and thus they stood, looking out of the window, watching together, while the winged legions of famine made desolate the garden of their dreams, swept away the labor and sacrifices of years, destroyed even life—blasted all that came in their path, except hope.

X

AT THE FOOT OF THE RAINBOW

WHILE the watching silences leaned close, the demon of famine danced the hunger dance upon the on-stretching northern slopes of the valley, leering at pale groups through the windows of lonely cabins while he wound his sinister steps about the humble homes. Like sentinels of hope, eternal, unconquerable, the Joshuas stood amid the wreck of bright dreams, facing the enemy, front, flank, and rear, with the daggers of their fantastic arms; sword-leaved yuccas held a circle here and there inviolate, and cactus fought with fearsome thorns for life and sunlight—but the flowers and grasses were gone, the hand of the ravager had stripped from the desert's breast her embroidered robe of life.

Drifting into heaps, flowing with the wind, spreading far in the sunlight, the world-old hordes of hunger marched on, while men watched, helpless, silent, and women drew children close about their knees and prayed. While the sun blazed down as if with holy wrath upon the ravaging of the valley, his valley, the infinite

legions of famine flowed like gray waters of living death to the brink of the wash where wandered the unhappy spirit of the river.

Half a mile beyond stretched the lush green of the fields and trees of the Circle Dagger Ranch; the hordes moved on, smothering the burning rocks and the blinding glare of the sands with gray—swept on and on. But the floods of the years had deeply eroded the river's southern bank, rimming the mesa at the foot of the castle mountains where lay the Circle Dagger with a barrier cliff, a guarding palisade, its walls washed clean and true by each flood. And at the foot of the barrier the advancing legions paused, piled into horrible gray drifts and heaps. Wolf Vogel rode along the brink of the cliffs on a white horse, gloating. The infinite thousands poured into the wash until the dead river flowed with horrible life—and then turned back. The Circle Dagger was safe!

Men and women turned to God with an agonized question in their hearts—why!—why!—why!—and even as their souls cried aloud, their lips set in grim lines and they strove to hold their dazed eyes steady as they looked—for all beheld Wolf Vogel leering through the windows at them, as they sat together in little family groups. Up and down and across the scourged land he rode, silent, gloating.

In Mirage Meadows he paused beside the devastated fields, and Lenore glimpsed him through the window. The sisters drew the curtains instantly, and while Marjorie made sure that her automatic pistol was loaded and in order, Lenore watched through a tiny opening. Turning from the field he rode to the house, circled it, and dismounted before the door. With his bridle over his arm, he stepped upon the porch, and Marjorie lifted her automatic, aiming at a spot just above the doorknob, her breast heaving with the pounding of her heart, but the hand holding the weapon tensely steady. Vogel knocked, his huge knuckles rattling the thin door, and Lenore shrank back from the window, and took her place beside Marjorie. Again resounding thumps rattled the door, but before Marjorie could summon her voice, the sisters heard him step off the porch, and when they looked through a cautiously parted curtain he was riding swiftly away. While they were still watching, wonderingly thankful, approaching hoofbeats reached their ears, and they ran to another window, opening the curtains wide, and soon Cal loped into view, carrying Jerry. If the smiles they gave him were a little tremulous, they were smiles just the same, and his tired discouraged eyes kindled in answer.

"What are the other people—our people, go-

ing to do, Jerry?" Marjorie asked, breaking the spell of silence which had followed the first exchanges of the three comrades.

"I don't know, move on, I suppose," he answered. "Most of them will have to move on to find work, in order to keep from starving."

"They are all so scattered, so far from each other, from anyone! I—sympathize with the men, but oh! my heart is breaking for the women! the lonely women and children!" she exclaimed huskily. "They hardly ever see another woman —can't I go to them? Won't you take me? Just seeing them, being with them for a few moments would help me, and perhaps it would help them."

"God knows it would—how much they need you!" he said reverently.

"I want to try. Will you take me?" she urged, a little color straying into her cheeks as she lifted her eyes to his.

"I'll come down early in the morning in the wagon, and bring Cal along," he promised. "Then we will all drive to town, and Lenore can spend the day with Mrs. West. I'll borrow a saddle from Rainbow, put it on one of my team, and we can ride over the whole valley. Will that be all right?"

"Mrs. West has often asked me to spend a day with her, and I'll be glad to go," Lenore agreed.

"If I hadn't promised never to forgive you,"

Marjorie smiled with a momentary flash of her unconquerable spirit, "I would be just a little glad that as long as I have to depend upon a man, that he's you, Jerry!"

Far up the valley Marjorie and Jerry stopped their horses in mid-morning upon the summit of a tiny knoll. They had driven to Mirage Station very early, and Mrs. West had taken Lenore to her motherly bosom, Rainbow Ben had listened to Jerry's announcement of Marjorie's plans, then pointed to his saddle, and hurried outside to stand beside Marjorie, mounted upon Cal, reaching up his calloused, old hands to clasp the strong young one she leaned down to extend.

Full of courage Marjorie had ridden out of the sprawling desert settlement beside Jerry—but as they looked down together upon the blasted fields which had been the hard-won pride and hope of Lem Harkness and the woman who had stood at his side while together they worked with mind, body and heart, love, hope, and faith to make real their rainbow dream of a home in the fair land of the sun—dread held them motionless for a space. Beyond the fields stood the farm buildings, the small, neat house, symbol of home.

It was Cal who at last broke the spell holding them back, for, always impatient of inaction, he started on, and Marjorie stretched out a hand to Jerry. Riding close, he took it, and for a space

they rode hand in hand, each strengthening the other.

"Mornin', Lem," Jerry greeted as they swung from their saddles beside a wagon, already half loaded with household goods.

The gaunt, stooped homesteader looked up dazedly from his work, and did not answer for a moment. Then he turned to Marjorie, his face working queerly, and gripped her shoulder with a reverent, work-roughened hand.

"If you've got—got a smile left in your heart —go in to see—see Mary!" he pleaded brokenly, and turned his face away from Jerry.

And Marjorie went in to "see Mary," four frightened children gathering about her as she entered the house. And while she shared with the frail, work-worn mother every smile and hope she had in her heart, the two men sat down upon a box, and talked as men talk, of the days ahead, of the chances of obtaining work, cursing the despoilers, but masking the bitter turmoils in their souls with commonplaces, seeking to hide from each other the heartbreak of the wreck of bright dreams.

In the sanctity of her little home, seated before the dead hearth, gazing with unseeing eyes upon the pages of the worn family Bible lying open upon her lap, Marjorie had found Mary. With the children clinging to them, they had gone down

into the valley of understanding tears—but when at last they came out to the men, their arms about each other, they came to offer comfort, to share courage eternal. Lem looked once into his wife's eyes, and buried his haggard face in his knotted hands. She went to him swiftly, and he looked up at last at Marjorie, standing among them in chaps, shirt, and sombrero—but not looking like a boy, a man, but a woman—the mother of mankind.

"We won't go—yet—just yet!" Mary said softly, and Lem Harkness rose and put his arm awkwardly about his wife's shoulders.

"For twelve years Mary and I have tried—tried hard to make a dream come true—a sort of rainbow dream," he said unsteadily. "This year with a crop we would have made the grade!" he choked, and then went on. "When we came here Mary was young, she was pretty, and strong and full of hope, just as you are! And I—I was young and—and the rainbow was bright! It has been hard to see it sometimes, but when it faded everywhere else we sort of kept it bright in our hearts—trying—working—doing our best—believing that some day the dam would be built—we'd sort of find it at the foot of the rainbow—if we were worthy—and—and all our dreams would come true! But now—now—God has forgotten us!"

"No—not that," Marjorie protested gently, "we—" but he interrupted hoarsely.

"Why has he sent this plague upon the innocent—and spared—spared the fiend of the Circle Dagger? From the day we came until this day, he has sought to drive us out, to take the bread from the mouths of our children, just as he has attempted to drive out everyone who came seeking to found a home! The wealth and plenty he flaunts in our faces is builded upon broken hearts! And now he is spared, and we have to move on! Move on, knowing that even if we are able to come back some day, we will find the land stripped, home gone, fences, barns, all vanished! Why has God left us naked, and—"

"He has not!" Marjorie interrupted with the instinctive wisdom which is the heritage of the mothers of men. "We have honor, life, hope, and strength! The devil takes care of his own—but if God's people keep the faith and are strong, their victory is certain, their heritage waiting! The battle is not over. It is the last thrust of the strong which wins the victory!"

"The last thrust," he repeated slowly. "We'll keep the faith," he went on, his voice stronger, "we'll fight on until—" he paused and looked from Marjorie to his wife, to his children, "—until we know it is His will which guides our retreat!"

From lonely homesteads to remote ranches Marjorie and Jerry rode, and in each home Marjorie shared the hope and sorrow in her own heart with the hopes and sorrows of the women she met. At last the two comrades rode back through the purple shadows, their souls exalted.

When they dismounted, old Rainbow Ben came hurrying through the dusk, and while they watched wonderingly he took Cal's head between his hands. "Hawse," he said, "I wisht I could shake hands with you, you ole son o' the desert stars! I been talkin' to Miss Lenore. I know what you done, an' as one ole desert man to another, I jes' want to say, shake!"

Jerry listened, his throat queerly tight, and while he looked at Rainbow amazement grew in his eyes, for on either hip the old freighter wore Sarah and Betsy, his old six-guns—the guns he could make sing a booming chorus.

"Ramon and I would have killed Wolf, but Marjorie wouldn't let us!" he said lamely.

"O' course she wouldn't, an' she was right!" affirmed old Rainbow. "You are young, an'—an' a whole lot o' things. An' he's got money, power—they'd hang you! But me, I'm old, an' it don't matter. I jes' been waitin' fer that saddle. Me an' Saray an' Betsy aim to call on that snake right now!"

"You must not! You must not!" cried Mar-

jorie, stepping close to Rainbow, and gripping his thin old shoulders with pleading hands. "You have been so good to Lenore and me—we need you now when there is so much trouble—promise me you won't do this unless—unless the time comes when there is no other way!"

For many long moments he looked at her silently, his face working, his eyes bright in the dusk.

"When the time comes," he said, his old voice even, "Saray an' Betsy will sing their song!"

While the dead days groped their way into the west the exodus from the valley continued. Wagons heaped with household goods, improvised seats filled with women and children, plowed through the dust of winding desert roads. As silent and drear as the passing days they went, the heads of the laboring horses hanging, the women holding children in their arms, or sitting with folded, tired hands, the men looking straight ahead toward the one hope left within their vision —work.

But a day came when the last living sign of the invading hordes of famine vanished, and when Jerry stopped on his way to town at the little home in Mirage Meadows, the sisters ran out eagerly to meet him. "Hear that, Cal?" his old time spirit flashed as he turned to the big horse beside him, when Marjorie had replied to his offer to bring

them anything he could from town. "Hear that?" he repeated. "All she wants us to bring is 'good news'! Are you feelin' strong—strong enough to tote back anything as big as that?" he grinned, and rode away.

When he stopped to speak to Rainbow Ben, he noted a stranger standing in front of Major West's store. He was about to ask regarding him, when Rainbow erupted.

"I been doin' some ridin'," he volunteered. "I been plumb over the valley, an' I been braggin' a leetle mite about that hawse o' yourn. Yes, sir, I come durn near havin' to shoot Jim Burton in the foot to keep him from marchin' right over an' killin' Wolf Vogel! Them gals up your way has sort o' found a place in folkses hearts 'round here, an' I come so blame near havin' a gineral stampede that I wisht I was a-ridin' Cal, so's to be in time to kill that snake afore somebody got there ahead o' me! I e-loo-cidated Marjorie's p'int quite some considerable. At last folks sort o' agreed that if her p'int o' view was good enough fer me, an' you, an' Ramon, it was good 'nough fer them. Then me an' Saray an' Betsy moseyed over to see Wolf. He didn't 'pear to enj'y our visit so much, but he got our idee! Yes, he got our idee! You see I made it sort o' plain that if one o' them gals even thought she saw him, we'd kill him! You tell Marjorie she kin ride over the

hull plumb valley as long as they's a heart thumpin' a man's ribs in these parts! Yes, sir-ree! an' be as safe as if me an' you an' all the rest was ridin' with her!

"Come over an' meet Mr. Stanley," he hurried on before Jerry could express his relief and gratitude. "He's a stranger, come in on the mornin' train," and they walked to meet the new arrival.

"I picked you for Jerry Miller as soon as I saw your horse," Stanley laughed when Rainbow introduced them. "Ben has been telling me about you, he says you were born to be hung, and four or five other things; but that if he was going to get into trouble, he'd like to have you along!"

"Rainbow always praises his friends," Jerry smiled, studying the sunburnt, tall, but slightly stooped man before him, noting his smile, his eyes which seemed to be looking beyond, ahead, he could not exactly place the feeling they gave him, except to know that he liked this stranger.

"I am beginning to pick up a crew," began the other, "for some work—"

"Work!" exclaimed Jerry, stepping closer. "You mean you want men to work—to work here!"

"Just that," smiled the other, his eyes keen.

"Can a man hold his homestead, and—and

work for you?" Jerry asked, his brain dizzy with joy, yet fearing to believe what his ears heard.

"That is exactly what I want you to do," Stanley nodded quietly. "I am an engineer connected with the Reclamation Service, and we are preparing to throw a dam across the canyon up—"

"The dam!" Jerry interrupted in a whisper, then gripped the engineer's shoulders. "There's a couple of girls on a homestead up the valley," he began tensely, "and one of them is a bookkeeper and stenographer! You'll give her a—a job!" he stuttered in his eagerness, while the older man studied his eyes. "She's got to have it! You'll have an office, and—"

"I'll need her," the engineer answered, still smiling his quiet, inscrutable smile. "I'll need her, and I'll need every man in the valley and a great many more when we get going. Ben is to be my boss teamster, and from what he has told me, I would like you, if you want a job, to help me in—"

"I'm hired, chief! I want to yell, but somehow I can't!" Jerry gulped, and looked away.

For half an hour the engineer talked, explaining his plans, while Jerry kept making sure that he was awake. "If you see that girl," Stanley concluded, "you might tell her that I'll be needing her in a few days!"

"I'm on my way to do just that!" whooped Jerry, springing into the saddle at a single bound, and a moment later Cal was disappearing at a furious run.

"This job of helping to make home lands is —worth while!" mused the engineer more to himself than to Ben, as he watched the horse race away.

"You're durned whistlin'!" agreed Rainbow, studying his plug, preparing to partake of a "chaw." "I been waitin' fer that dam so plumb long it sort o' don't matter about me. The years has been gainin' on me lately, but I feel so good this mornin' I want to kill somebody! I would too, but a dog-gone gal won't let me! J'ine me in a chaw?" he hospitably extended the plug.

When Jerry rushed into the home in Mirage Meadows, the girls looked once at his radiant face, then ran to him. "You brought it! You brought the good news!" Marjorie cried—and when he told them of the treasure they had all found at the foot of their dream rainbow, tears of unutterable thanksgiving welled into their eyes, and both hid their faces against his breast. His own eyes wet, his heart exalted, Jerry drew them close in his arms, and hid his face in the mingled brown and gold of their hair.

XI

A MIRAGE MADE REAL

WHEN the first great wave of thankfulness had at last lifted them to its crest so that they could see again, the three comrades in the little Mirage Meadows home smiled at each other through happy tears. For a few minutes they talked excitedly, and then Marjorie gripped Jerry's arm.

"Let me take the news to Mary Harkness!" she pleaded. "I must tell her—I can't waste a moment!"

"I sort of want you to," he agreed. "Get into your togs and take Cal. You can safely ride alone now. And tell Lem to be in Mirage early tomorrow afternoon, and ask him to notify all the folks who are left as far down as Sim Watson's."

Marjorie did not pause this time as she approached the Harkness homestead, but rode at Cal's free run clear into the yard, slid the pinto to a stop, swung out of the saddle and ran up the steps, pushing open the door. "Mary! Oh, Mary!" she called, and Mrs. Harkness hurried to meet her, while the children came scampering. Leading the older woman into the kitchen, Mar-

jorie shut the door. A moment she hesitated, having so much to tell that she did not know where to begin, and then attempted to tell it all at once.

"You tell your husband—I think I saw him out by the barn," Marjorie urged when at last they came out of the little kitchen. "I'll tell the children."

"Lem! Oh, Lem!" called Mary, running toward the barn, a new note vibrating in her voice, and Marjorie went inside to the children.

It was a long time before husband and wife came to the house, but as they entered together years seemed to have dropped away from them. "Tell Jerry I will be there tomorrow afternoon, and will notify the others," Lem began, looking from Marjorie to his wife and children, the wondering thankfulness growing in his eyes. "We have family prayers in the evening," he continued simply, "but today Mary and I feel that we cannot wait until evening! We—we would like to have you with us."

While all found seats he took from the mantle the family Bible, seated himself near a window, and opening the Book began to read.

" 'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want,' " his low voice filled the room, and when he had read on to the end of the great song of faith, all kneeled while Lem Harkness talked with his Master, giving thanks for earthly blessings, for

wife, children, and for Marjorie, and in simple-hearted earnestness asking forgiveness for what he termed his weakness and lack of faith. Marjorie's heart was very humble when she rode homeward, but her soul was exalted, borne upon the tireless wings of hope.

Down the valley, threading the wastes between the river's wraith and the low hills, Jerry rode hour after hour, and as he rode his heart grew more humble—for every time he stopped Cal at a lonely homestead he saw the joyful sun of hope arise in haggard eyes. At last he swung out of his saddle close to the spot where Jim Burton was loading a covered wagon with furniture and other household goods.

"Evenin' Jim," he greeted, and hesitated, for the loaded wagon unfolded to him a tragedy which hit him hard. "The Government is going to put in the dam at last!" he blurted huskily. "I'm lookin' for a crew for the engineer! How about takin' a job?"

"Are you locoed?" exclaimed Jim Burton, his voice low, tense, as he sprang from the wagon and gripped Jerry's shoulders. "The dam! Work! You aren't locoed—you aren't jokin,' Jerry? Say you aren't lyin'!" he begged, averting his face.

"Mr. Stanley, he's the engineer, says it's goin' through!" Jerry told him. "Rainbow is goin' to

be boss teamster, an' I'm sort of a straw boss, hirin' the crew!"

"You stay here a minnit," pleaded Burton, "I got to go an' tell Nettie!"

Jerry sat down upon a box, and a big tawny dog came to look him over suspiciously, then sat down upon his haunches a few feet away. For many minutes Jerry and the dog regarded each other solemnly, and then Jim Burton and his wife came out of the house.

"It—it seems too good to be true!" she cried, her eyes radiant, as she looked at him over the head of the baby she held in her arms. "The dam! the dam at last! Oh! it has been such a mirage! Tell me again that it is going to be made real!"

"And Jim can get—is going to have work? He can work here, where we can hold our homestead?" she enthused when Jerry had finished.

"He'll have a job as soon as the work starts," promised Jerry and then went on, grinning: "but o' course Jim's such an ornery cayuse that he's likely to get fired—" but the change in the sensitive face of the girl-woman made him instantly regret his rough attempt at pleasantry. "Don't you worry, Mrs. Burton," he sought to make amends. "I'm doin' the hirin' an' firin', an' Jim's got no more chance of gettin' fired than he has of goin' to heaven!"

As Jerry rode homeward, making the last of his calls on the way, he found the news had traveled upon invisable wings, and at the scattering homesteads whole families came running to meet him. And here and there, upon the winding roads, he came upon a wagon, loaded with a family and their possessions—wagons overtaken in their drear retreat and turned back by the magically flying news—families guided back to little homes on the land by the bright hands of hope.

When Jerry drove into Mirage Station with Marjorie and Lenore early the next afternoon, the straggling street was already dotted with wagons, horses and burros, even though it lacked an hour of the time set for the men to report. And every equipage had brought an entire family, for none could remain away on this day, the day when the mirage of heart's desires began to materialize. The excited crowd in front of Major West's store parted to allow the three to pass, and the major greeted them inside, the lines of his lean face puckered into queer crinkles by his emotions, while he sent them to his office in the rear, where Stanley was waiting.

"I brought these letters from my former employers." Marjorie began a little breathlessly, when the introductions were over, "to show you that I—"

"I never read recommendations!" he interrupted, studying her. "I find out how people spend their time, and make up my mind accordingly. I have heard how you have spent yours since you came here, and the job is yours!"

When the engineer went outside to meet the men, twenty-two homesteaders faced him, their families grouped about them.

Speaking quietly, his eyes traveling from face to face he told them that the survey made years before had been but a preliminary step, that he first planned to establish a permanent camp at a convenient spot, survey the dam site, the land which would be covered by the lake formed by the dam, and then survey the valley, so that boundaries could be established, canals laid out on paper, and the acreage to be irrigated computed and classified. His equipment would be ordered as soon as he could send in his requisitions and the transit men to head the various survey parties would be sent as soon as he was ready for them.

"On this job we want to give employment to all of you men, who are already located here," he continued. "Ben will have charge of all freighting, and Jerry will be almost everything, from foreman to assistant cook for a while," he smiled. "He will tell you when to report for work, but I wish all of you would fill out the

application forms Miss Hope will give you. Is there a place we could use for an office today?"

"How about Honest John's saloon?" asked Jerry, and the suggestion was instantly adopted, the little crowd eagerly trooping into the old desert barroom.

Taking her place behind the bar, Marjorie arranged ink and pens brought from Major West's store, and handed a blank to each man in turn, assisting him in making his application in accordance with the instructions of the engineer. Long after the little sheaf of papers was complete, the homesteaders and their women and children talked in excited groups, their eyes bright with a re-born vision, while the tall, quiet, smiling engineer went from group to group, carrying with him a friendliness which was answered by instant loyalty.

For days John Stanley rode with Jerry about the valley, through the canyon and over the lava hill, and far and wide over the dead plain above it. But every day he spent some time with Marjorie, stopping at her home, while she wrote out in longhand the requisitions he dictated for material. Then came a day when loaded freight cars were shunted onto the Mirage Station switch, and the men of the valley, summoned by Jerry, took out of those cars lumber, tents, furniture, camp duffle of every nature, horses, mules, wagons, hay,

grain, and all manner of equipment. At the camp site the sound of saws and hammers broke the stillness, where others were busy erecting the camp under the directions of the engineer.

The news of the dam spread far and near. Settlers, adventurers, workmen, came from north, south, east, and west—and the camp grew as if by magic. A huge, wooden-floored canvas mess tent flanked the neat frame office shack where Marjorie held sway with her books and new typewriter. Hop Lung came to lend his Celestial dignity to the cook tent adjoining the mess room, and neat tent houses with board floors grew in straight rows. Corrals and storehouses were established, and John Stanley was ready for the real work in hand.

While the men laughed at the heat and worked through the days which passed in a flashing cascade, a blessed security enfolded the women. They had no money for luxuries, but they now had enough for necessities. With ever growing frequency they drove to Mirage Station, for their mail, to purchase supplies, to talk with other women whom they met there. Major West's store began to expand, and on the new shelves were many simple things dear to the hearts of women. The old major clucked in his cheek many times as he sorted the mail, for papers and magazines began to appear, and with them came a broadening

of the valley's vision as well as a change in the cut of skirts and the trimming of hats.

To the people of the Valley of the Sun, hidden in the breast of the age-old desert, the war beyond the seas had seemed far away, unreal—but with the coming of each mail its sinister shadow crept closer.

Marjorie drove to and from her work in the camp office with Jerry, and many times as they came home to Mirage Meadows they found Ramon and Lenore waiting amid the sunset lights. Usually Ramon rode home beneath the watching stars, but always he stayed with Jerry to accompany the girls to the dances in Honest John's Saloon where the people of the valley now gathered on every other Saturday night—dances where ten men fought for the favor of every girl.

When the Fourth of July loomed large on the horizon, Rainbow Ben appointed himself chairman of a committee of his own selection to arrange the valley's first Pioneer's Picnic in fitting celebration of America's birth. When the sun looked into the valley that morning he beheld happy families driving toward the canyon in the lava hill where the picnic was to be held in the shade of the rock walls of the dam site. From the east and south groups of cowboys came jingling, and from over the hills of the north and west Indians rode in single file.

Smoke was already rising from the barbecue pits when the canyon began to fill with homesteaders and their wives and families, prospectors, cowboys, Indians, miners, the men of the camp, and Rainbow soon had his program under way. The cowboys and Indians filled the morning with feats of breath-taking horsemanship. Then came the barbecue—and a barbecue under Rainbow Ben's direction was not a meal, but an event. When the last small boy had finally surrendered, admitting that he could no longer swallow, homesteaders, Indians, prospectors, cowboys and miners mingled in happy groups, discovering common interests while they talked or watched the games of the children organized by Marjorie and Lenore. And when they parted to ride or drive to their far-scattered homes each one carried a new interest, a new something which made him a part of a larger world.

XII

THE HOUR OF AWAKENING

WITH THE passing of the summer's heat Mrs. Stanley joined her husband, as did the wives of many of his assistants, making homes of the canvas houses in the growing camp. Following the lure of a home on the land, settlers came to cast their lot in the valley, men and women, families, old and young.

Major West enlarged his store a second time, and two clerks assisted him in handling the constantly increasing trade of the valley. A garage of corrugated iron reared itself, square and ugly, between two time silvered shacks of boards. On the other side of the general store Foo Chung set up his tubs and arranged his ironing board, and night and day pressed and scrubbed. And when Chung had watched and worked for a while he wrote a queer string of turkey tracks to his "cousin," Hop Joe—and soon Hop Joe appeared to transform with sleepless Pagan magic a row of rickety shacks into his idea of a metropolitan hotel.

Workmen came and went, a steady stream of freight arrived for the dam and camp. The

railroad moved the box car which had served as freight shed, built a square red depot, installed a combination telegraph operator, freight and ticket agent, and when the new sign was hung on the depot, Mirage Station became a part of the past, and the town of Mirage was born. Real estate agents came with their talk of "town lots" and "subdivisions," and new buildings, looking out of place and lonely, stood here and there.

With the ever increasing payroll of the camp painted women came to ply their old profession, and with them men skilled in devious arts. Beside the new barber shop the "Palace Billiard Hall" flaunted its sign, and directly across the street stood the new drug store, where "Doctor" Anderson prescribed with equal felicity for a sick baby or an ailing mule, sold phonograph records or presided over the news stand—and Mirage stretched itself in the sun and became a part of the life of the world.

But however the town might preen itself, Honest John's saloon remained the center of the community life of the valley. Transformed within for its new use, kept clean and inviting by regular committees, it was here that the women met day after day, here that all the people of the valley gathered for their community meetings and merrymakings. No one of the women of the

valley drove to town every day, for they were busy women; but when duty either permitted or required a visit to Mirage, they were sure to find other women there, drawn by necessary errands or by pleasure, visiting together in the clubroom, while their children romped in the playroom partitioned off the main hall.

And the old walls, which had seen so much violence, blood, and tragedy in the old days of the mines, must have looked down in wonder upon the changing groups of women, for they were transfigured, born anew. And while they discussed new or easier methods of housework, cooking, clothes, children, books, topics of the day, the countless interests of women, wives, mothers, a new happiness bloomed in their eyes and hearts. The comradship of work burned away the last vestage of restraint, of suspicion, and the bonds of their common ideal united the men in their onward march.

When the shortening days brought Christmas, the real Santa Claus, flying swiftly upon the wings of love, displaced old Rainbow Ben and his pack mule. But while Rainbow carefully avoided the subject with grown-ups, he cross-examined every youngester he met as to whether or not he was going to hang up his stocking—and his sun-dried old heart swelled to bursting

with secret joy, for he knew that the Christmas spirit had come to stay in the Valley of the Sun.

The work on the dam progressed steadily with the passing days. The foundations for the ends were blasted from the rim of the gorge to its bottom, and then a great trench was dug across the dry wash of the canyon's floor. Huge timbers, firmly braced, held the sand and gravel in check while the trench went down, deeper and deeper until its floor was bed rock. While workmen wrought a network of twisted beams and rods of steel, great concrete mixers were placed upon foundations already prepared for them, and jointed pipes stretched from their spouts down into the trench. For many days Rainbow's teamsters had been freighting cement, and huge piles of full sacks backed each mixer. Rock crushers were installed in places prepared for them, and belted, like the mixers, to powerful gasoline engines. Hoists were rigged for drag line scoops. Well drillers at either hand sent their drills and casing down into the living water far below the plain, pumps and engines were installed, and pipe lines laid to each mixer.

The crushers began their crunching and pounding, splinteringly transforming the boulders fed into them into crushed rock, the hoists scooped the sand from the wash, madly working men emptied

the sacks of cement, the pumps sent the water gurgling through the pipes to join rock, sand and cement in the grinding maw of the Titanic mixers, and the magic rock which flows like water but which becomes one rock flowed raspingly through the pipes and into the network of twisted steel in the trench to become the bottom of the dam. On a level with the sand of the dry wash, the walls of the canyon were joined as with one rock, and the engineers waited complacently for the rains and the floods, knowing that they could hope to build the dam no higher until they had passed, but secure in the knowledge that the foundation of the dam was in, was safe.

The rains came, the floods roared through the canyon, and rushed on, leaving Stanley well satisfied, for with the aid of the dam's foundation he had been able to accurately measure the floods gathered by the spreading slopes of the watershed, and he knew that the few rains of winter would fill the completed dam to the brim, forming a lake which would spread the river over the valley for nearly two years, perhaps more than two years. There would be an abundance in good years, and an ample reserve for a possible dry year.

With the rains the settlers of the valley dropped temporarily from the ranks of the construction crew, and began preparing their land for plant-

ing—for to them the work on the dam was but a steppingstone, a blessing which made many things possible, but it was to the land they had come. And a change had come over the men. They worked from sun to sun, but they laughed when they worked, traded labor and the use of implements, and the preparation for the planting went ahead as it had never gone before. Marjorie could not be spared from her office in the camp, and she returned home hurt, wondering, after each attempt to hire anyone to plow and prepare her field. But one evening as she drove homeward alone she saw Lenore standing at the edge of the field in the dusk, and when she joined her, Lenore's amazement was answered in Marjorie's eyes. Smooth and even, freshly plowed and harrowed, the little field lay level in the early moonlight.

"Jerry took me to town today," Lenore explained excitedly, "and when we got home a little while ago all this had been done!"

"But who—who—" stammered Marjorie, examining the field in delight.

"Jerry knows, of course," Lenore told her, "but he would not tell me. He tried to act surprised, and looked at the wagon tracks over there and said there were eight of them! That's all I could get out of him."

"Oh! you blessed people! I love all of you!"

Marjorie enthused, stretching out her arms to the whole valley.

While men and women and children worked in the fields at the planting, the flowers awoke and lifted their shimmering chalices of color to the limitless skies, and life in the valley drifted on like the soft spring breezes wandering over the flower carpeted distances. But a day came when the telegraph operator at Mirage left his key to hurry to Major West's store, and men rode here and there while women drove excitedly homeward, and the news leaped from lip to lip and spanned the spaces as if borne by the air—the war had come to the Valley of the Sun.

The settlers gathered that night in Honest John's Saloon by unspoken agreement, joining their strength to meet the first shock of the crisis. In excited groups they discussed the meager news the telegraph operator had been able to gather from the outside world, the older men grim, the younger quiet, the women watching them all yearningly.

Orders came directing John Stanley to stop work on the dam for the duration of the war. The floating population of laborers who peopled the camp drifted rapidly toward the great centers, in answer to the lure of high wages. Many of the new settlers followed, and the silences crept again into the valley.

Marjorie worked early and late with the engineer, closing up the business affairs of the project. In answer to one of Stanley's letters a summons came for Rainbow Ben, and when he returned to the valley he wore beneath his shirt the badge of a deputy United States Marshal, and his old heart was glad. John Stanley's completed arrangements provided for a caretaker for the supplies and machinery at the dam site, for Marjorie's appointment to keep and transcribe records of temperature, rainfall, and flood measurements, the whole to be in charge of Rainbow Ben. His arrangements were scarcely completed when the wires brought Stanley word that he had been commissioned a captain of engineers, and orders to report at once, bringing with him as many of his experienced assistants as possible.

Jerry locked his little house, put the key into his pocket, mounted Cal and rode slowly to Mirage Meadows through the fast growing dusk of his last day in the valley. A little way from her home, he found Marjorie watching the sunset lights high above the castle mountains.

"I told Rainbow I'd be here, he's going to drive me to the train," Jerry began, trying to be casual, and then hurried on, his eyes holding hers. "You are to have my team while I'm gone, and—and I'm going to give you Cal, Marjorie!" he said, and stopped to clear his throat. "If—if you ever

have to give him up, give him to Rainbow."

"You must not give him to me," she answered, leaning against Cal's neck. "He loves you too much—it isn't right to—give him away! But I love him, and I'll—oh! I'll love to have him, to keep him for you, till you come back!"

"Giving him to you is not—not like giving him away," he persisted awkwardly.

"Then he is mine," she compromised, "until you come back."

"Hear that, Cal!" Jerry turned to the horse, patting his outstretched nose. "And you remember what I've told you, that I'm depending on you to sort of keep an eye on Marjorie while I'm gone," he smiled, and then put his arm about Cal's neck, and whispered close to his ear: "*Adios,* old partner!" and silently patted the pinto's arching neck.

"Here is the key to my house," he turned to Marjorie again, extending the key, "if you girls ever need—"

"Give that to Lenore," she whispered, interrupting. "She has been there so much with you, and everything in it is so—so close—" she faltered to a stop, then stumbled on while he vainly studied her eyes in the deepening shadows, "—you—you love her! Oh! you must love her—she's so—"

"Love her!" he exclaimed, his voice scarcely

more than a whisper. "No one could know her, be with her, and not love her! She seems like a—spirit. I love her, but—"

"Then go to her—tell her!" Marjorie commanded, her hands upon his shoulders. "This has come so suddenly, it has dazed her! It is right for you to go, she would not have you stay—but—giving you up may kill her!" she paused to draw his head down so that she could whisper the things she could not trust her voice to say aloud, while he held her close in his arms. She slipped away from him and hid her face against Cal's neck while Jerry stumbled toward the house.

The Lenore he found waiting for him in the golden glow of the lamp took his breath away, and the light in her eyes made him dizzy as he looked. Without spoken word he took her in his arms, held her gently, fearing to crush her, and she rested content. While he whispered the words which came rushing, halting, then hurrying again, telling her he worshipped her, her arms found their way about his neck and she clung to him, then partly released herself, and he reverently kissed her.

Only when he gave her the key to his little home did the tears well into her eyes. She hid her face for a moment, then whispered words of strength, of faith eternal, and he listened in wondering reverence, for he had come to comfort—and she

was comforting him, showing him her sacred heart, breaking, but triumphant.

And when Rainbow Ben's hail came, Jerry went out into the night, and drove with him to Mirage, where Captain Stanley was waiting with the young men of the valley.

XIII

THEY SHALL PASS

HIS FACE seamed and rutted by the feet of the hurrying years, old Chief Eagle Wing stood before his people, gathered in council upon the Triangle Bar Ranch nestling in the lap of the mountains. His eyes flashing from face to face, he spoke to them in their native tongue.

"The hands of many years hold me back, but you are Ramon's people, and he rides in three days to join the warriors gathering in the tents of the Great White Father," he finished, and while he stood, his head sunk forward upon his breast, the young men moved to Ramon's side, and the voices of the women rose in a wild minor chant, old as the desert.

Ramon dismounted beside the little home in Mirage Meadows, and found Lenore sitting in the shade, her hands in her lap, her eyes on the far distances, dreaming. Coming in from her hoeing, Marjorie watched them for a moment, then hurried to welcome Ramon, bouyant, teasing, sympathetic by turns, ending by promising to ride with him on his homeward way as far as the rim of the valley.

Mounted and ready, she waited, and at last Ramon joined her, and they rode slowly over the flower jeweled slopes. On the summit they paused, their horses close. He took her outstretched hand, and they talked, their voices low, that even the listening silences might not hear. When he wheeled his horse and galloped down the opposite slope Marjorie watched until the distances hid him from view, then slipped from her saddle and hid her face against Cal's neck.

Springing from the crumbly soil, seeking their place in the sun, the growing crops crowded the days of the homesteaders with work. Marjorie hoed and cultivated in her field, and the men left in the valley tilled their soil eagerly, almost feverishly, but the song was gone from their hearts, for there were many breaks in the comradely ranks. But they worked on from sun to sun, knowing that in doing their duty on their land they were keeping faith with those others whose duty called them away.

The women, unused to joining in the movements of the outside world, held back a little timidly at first, not knowing how, or where to begin. For many days Lenore dreamed, her eyes and heart far away—but suddenly she awoke, eagerly wrote letters to far cities, and on the day she summoned the women of the valley to Honest John's old saloon, they joined their

hands and hearts with legions of the Red Cross.

With the thrill which comes only to the pioneer on the land, and to him only once, the girls enjoyed the first vegetables from their garden, their first fruits of victory. After the early vegetables the later crops matured with such rapidity that Marjorie worked early and late, dizzy in the noontime heat, dogged, determined. Rainbow Ben, driving back to Mirage after his frequent trips to the site of the dam to make sure that the caretaker was on the job and that everything was safe, stopped often in Mirage Meadows to talk over the latest news from Jerry, or lack of news—but always as he talked he worked beside Marjorie.

An old copper mine just beyond the castle mountains awoke from its sleep of years and there was at once established not only a market, but a distinct need for the products of the valley. On Major West's advice and to carry forward her original plans, Marjorie decided to invest part of her savings, accumulated during her work in connection with the dam, in a flock of chickens and in a simple building and yard in which to house them—fowls which would eat the grain and other things she raised, and turn them into an income. Rainbow brought wire and lumber, and Marjorie hammered and sawed, and when at last the coops of pullets came and the girls turned

them into the little house and run provided for them, old Rainbow watched the sisters, chuckling at their happy excitement.

Spreading black clouds came drifting into the valley to make the heat of early September muggy, thick, sticky. In long lines the clouds sailed, grounding against the low hills, marking the valley with weird shadows in the sunlight, and veering into strange formations to blot out the stars at night. In quick flashes lightning illuminated the fair horizons, and Rainbow prophesied rain.

"But I thought it didn't rain in the summer time," protested Marjorie.

"It don't, exactly," he admitted, "the sky jes' busts, sort o' like the bottom fallin' out of a lake. An' then it's time to skee-daddle if you're in a canyon er draw er somethin', anywheres near!

"They usen to raise ole Harry with the railroad, an' with folks in low spots, but the railroad moved to where they don't reach 'em, an' folks has learned to stay away from some places. Most generally they busts off by the mountains anyway, so the flood jes' runs down the river an' melts in the sand."

The clouds were still hanging low here and there about the horizon when Marjorie rode to Mirage one afternoon. As she came out of the post office she found Rainbow waiting beside Cal.

"I got a warnin'," he whispered, "to be on the lookout fer some p'ison snakes. I was studyin' 'bout it, sort o' easy, when in lopes a Indian sent by Ole Eagle Wing. An' not only that, them Indians have got the same notion the Guv'ment has, only more partic'lar. Ole Eagle Wing says somebody is goin' ta blow up a troop train around here somewheres!"

"Blow up troops! in our valley!" Marjorie exclaimed, her eyes flashing. "You will prevent it, Rainbow. What is your plan? Our troops shall pass through safely!"

"That's jes' what I wired my boss!" Rainbow agreed. "Ole Eagle Wing sent word that his his people would guard the track for thirty miles west o' the valley. We've got to guard it through the valley. But I'm expectin' a wire from my boss, an' I got to wait fer—"

"Then I'll ride to summon the men!" interrupted Marjorie. "Where shall they meet you?"

"I'll be at the long tresle over the river wash," he told her.

Leaning forward in her saddle, sitting the flying pinto as if she were part of him, Marjorie rode through the late afternoon and on into the soft blackness of the starless night. And always as she dashed away from one home toward another, a man hurried out, heavily armed, to saddle and ride for the long trestle.

Rainbow Ben had already posted his guards at the bridges, and was apportioning out sections of track to be patrolled by the mounted men, when Marjorie reported to him.

"You ride home now, honey," old Rainbow pleaded in a whisper. "This ain't—"

"But you need us, Cal and me," she persisted. "We've come to help!"

"Havin' Cal to sort o' look out fer you makes it a heap easier on me," Rainbow gave in. "An' they's blame few of us. You ride that stretch 'tween the big white rock beyond Cave Butte an' the fust bridge this side," he surrendered. "I'll put Jim to ridin' 'tween that big white rock an' where the Indians finish off."

In the utter blackness beneath the clouds smothering the valley, the riders found their beats, and patrolled their alloted spaces through the hours. Faraway lightning glowed weirdly through the cloudblanket hiding the stars when the headlight of the locomotive of the first troop train looked through the murky blackness. Thundering through the silences, the heavy train swept on with its freight of men.

The lightning came closer. Thunder muttered in the west. On through the night rode the patrols. The second long train came roaring through the hills to rumble on into the east.

Just before the dawn which would end the vigil

of the patrols riding slowly back and forth, the clouds seemed to crush together, and the blackness baffled tired eyes. The storm broke miles away at the base of the western mountains, but the lightning illuminated the valley and the on-stretching rails in hot, blinding flashes.

In one momentary glare of white light Marjorie's weary eyes noted something on the track. Cal was snorting and stomping, but the headlight of the last train was gleaming far down the rails, and she dismounted to investigate. The darkness cheating her eyes, she groped with her hands until she found a package just wide enough to fit between the ties — then the lightning made the night white for an instant, and in that flash she saw a box camouflaged to look like the gravel of the roadbed, and without knowing why she knew, she realized that the wire leading from it to a device clamped to the rail was a firing mechanism.

Her heart numb, but her hands determined, she slipped the firing device from the rail, lifted the box, and carried it into the greasewood just as the train roared past. Fearing she would drop the box, she bent to place it carefully on the ground, then straightened up, to stagger and fall half-conscious from a blow back of the ear, a blow coming without warning from out the blackness while the rumble of the passing train still shook the ground.

Marjorie felt herself being picked up roughly by men who cursed in whispers, felt herself being carried swiftly. She dully realized that a little gray light had crept into the eastern sky, and then all was black again. A few moments later her captors set her upon her feet, and she tottered dizzily, her groping hands finding a rock wall. Instantly she was fully conscious. She knew she was in one of the caves of Cave Butte.

A man struck a match, and lighted a lantern. In the yellow light she saw the cave was large, was furnished with blankets and food, and her heart sank lower as she realized from the utter blackness of the entrance that it was far within the butte. All this one look told her, and her eyes turned back to the three men guarding her. One brought the lantern, and another, who seemed the leader, stepped close. Her hat gone, Marjorie's hair hung about her shoulders, disordered by the rough handling she had experienced. Amazement stilled the leader's curses. Seizing the neck of her blouse he ripped it open, a simpering sneer contorting his face as he looked, while Marjorie stood proud, still, her heart all but dead.

"Welcome to our midst, little one!" he gloated. "You're welcome even if you did spoil things for us to-night. We've got to wait now, and you don't know how much you are going to help us pass the time! Hold her while I search her," he

directed, and the other two pinioned her arms against the rock of the wall.

But when his profaning hands touched her, Marjorie wrenched herself free, and leaped to the other wall of the cave — and the men paused in their rush to catch her, for they looked into the cold blue muzzle of her automatic, drawn from the holster pocket hidden in her chaps.

"Hold up your hands!" she commanded, her voice dry, rasping. "Stand in line against that side! Keep your hands higher!"

They stood as she ordered, sullen, vicious. For half an hour which seemed thirty eternities she grimly covered the threatening trio, at the same time carefully guarding against a surprise attack from others who might appear through the black chamber of this inner cave's entrance.

Feeling sure at last that the bright light of the new day would have driven in any other members there might have been in the band of dynamiters, she cautiously worked her way toward the black entrance of the chamber in the rock, keeping the ugly trio covered and in line before her. The entrance reached, she backed into it — and in the blackness a hand tore the automatic from her grasp, arms gripped her from behind, and with the strength of a giant her unseen assailant dragged her back into the lighted chamber of the cave!

XIV

A CALL IN THE SUNRISE

RINGING dully in Marjorie's ears, like the tolling of the bells of a hopeless fate, gloating boasts boomed through the dead air of the cave. Merciless hands blackened the fair flesh of her arms while they bound her wrists at her back.

"So you're a wild one, huh!" leered the man who had surprised and overcome Marjorie in the chamber's entrance. "Well, we'll tame you!" he went on, while she shrank back against the rock of the wall, horrified by the nearness of his burning eyes, his swarthy, vicous face.

"I drove off that damned horse," he turned to the others. "He was bound he was comin' in, and I had to work fast because it was gettin' light, too blasted light for any of us to be outside of this hole with every Indian and settler lookin' for us!"

"We've been waiting for you long enough!" growled the leader.

"I was slow, was I!" bristled the other. "I heard what was goin' on when I come through the passage, an' I used sense, I waited until just the right time to persuade our little friend to join our house party."

"Get back and watch from the mouth of the outer — " began the leader, but a sneering chorus drowned his voice.

"And leave you to entertain the lady!" snapped one.

"That's like you," jeered another, "but it don't go! We got to wait a week to get the next bunch of trains, an' we got a party on, an' one man's as good as another!"

"That goes with me," the man who had captured Marjorie growled in agreement. "Besides no one is comin'. Nobody has even looked at this rock since we been here, an' when that horse went away he went fast!"

Cursing, furious, but too cowardly to attempt to quell the mutiny to which the presence of a woman within their power brought instant fire, the leader turned to vent his anger upon Marjorie.

"You made your little play, and now it's my turn," he snarled, gripping her shoulder and jerking her roughly toward him.

"Where do you get that — your turn — first!" cut in one of the others, his voice ugly, threatening.

"I just told you that one man was as good as another in this!" snapped a third.

"Let the lady choose," suggested the swarthy giant who had overpowered Marjorie, and his laugh boomed through the cave. "Choose the

one you love best!" he mocked, and the quartette gathered close about her. Shrinking back from the ring of sinister faces, Marjorie closed her eyes and was mute.

"Choose!" demanded the leader, and cursed as he struck her.

While Marjorie stood against the rock wall of the dimly lighted cavern in the heart of the butte, her hair falling about her fair, bruised face, her arms bound, her body quivering with dread, her heart praying for release, death — the sun looked into the valley and beheld a great pinto horse, riderless, but running as if borne upon wings. On a knoll overlooking the long trestle spanning the river's wash he stopped, etched against the crimson of a low-sailing cloud, and lifting his head he whistled the challenge of a king of the ranges, his clear call filling the sunrise with his summons to battle.

The mounted men gathered at the end of the trestle looked, saw the empty saddle, and wheeled their horses to spur toward him, while he whistled again his clear call to men. When the furiously riding men pounded up the slope of the knoll, he wheeled and ran smoothly back over the way he had come, while the men rode hard, following.

Within the black heart of the butte Marjorie stood before her torturers, mute, helpless, but too fine and proud to show weakness. Suspicious of

each other, jealous, snarling, the ugly quartette turned from her to their own quarrel.

"Block the entrance," furiously ordered the leader. "Then we needn't worry about — "

"Block it yourself!" sneered the others suspiciously.

"Get the cards, we'll cut for her!" suggested one.

"With your deck!" jeered another.

"We can draw straws," added a third.

"Who'll hold the straws!" mocked the first.

Knowing they could not trust each other, each one turned against the others by desire, cursing in German, Spanish and English, unwilling to yield even the chance of an advantage, they quarreled while the great pinto ran swiftly over the long slopes, a line of men riding hard in his wake. Close to the butte the big horse slowed down, walked to the entrance of the cave, and stopped. Dismounting, Rainbow Ben and his men studied the cavern, then slipped off spurs and boots, so as to walk noiselessly.

"I been in here," Rainbow whispered, "so we don't need to waste no time prospectin'," and he stealthily entered the cave with his men behind him. He listened a moment at the opening of the next chamber within the rock, and disappeared into the blackness.

"This is a four-handed game, and we'll all

play our hands!" the man who had caught Marjorie insisted belligerently.

"Come on, we're keepin' the lady waitin'!" urged another mockingly, and they turned to Marjorie, seized her — but before they could drag her from the wall a little old man leaped out of the blackness of the entrance. Shooting was out of the question for him, because every Hun was so close to Marjorie, but he charged the leader, and struck, the butt of one of his heavy old six-guns biting through skin and flesh to the skull — and the Hun crumpled to the floor of the cave. The other three turned upon Rainbow, reaching for weapons, but other men sprang into the yellow gloom of the dimly lighted cavern, hard men, fighting grimly. Blows thudded dully, curses boomed, and screams of agony sounded weirdly in the rock-smothered air, and Marjorie crouched against the wall while the struggle surged here and there. Fighting for their lives, the Huns fought with demoniac fury, but the grim men of the desert beat them down, bound them.

The battle over, old Rainbow went quickly to Marjorie, and she slipped into merciful oblivion in his arms. When she opened her eyes again she was lying in the bright sunlight upon a blanket of coats spread upon the ground. Dazedly, half-comprehendingly she looked from Rainbow to Lem Harkness who were bending over her, chaf-

ing her wrists, their hard hands yearningly seeking to serve, to be gentle. Her gaze slowly wandered back to Rainbow, then full recognition lighted her eyes, and she looked at the silent men grouped about her, at Cal, standing with the men as was his right.

"Where — where are they?" she asked, shuddering.

"Jes' you stop worryin', honey," old Rainbow urged huskily. "They's piled in a row over yonder, all hog tied! It's you we're — " but a soft nicker interrupted him as Cal stretched out his nose to caress Marjorie's cheek.

"Oh, Cal! Cal!" she whispered, cuddling his nose between her cheek and shoulder. "You warned me — but I had to do it, Cal! Those — they said in the cave that you tried to come with me — but — at last you ran away!"

"He wasn't runnin' away," denied Rainbow, he was jes' roundin' up his crew, an' workin' fast!"

Nettie Burton was with her husband when he brought his buckboard to take Marjorie home. She sprang from the rig to kneel beside Marjorie, straining her to her breast, her tears falling fast, while Rainbow and Jim looked at Cal, and then with him over the sun-gilded distances.

Driving rapidly to Mirage Meadows, Jim Burton left Marjorie to the care of the loving hearts

and hands of his wife and Lenore, and of the women who came from the east and west to surround her with their love and courage. Overwhelmed by the reaction from her experience, Marjorie lay pale and still in her bed, clinging tight to Lenore with one hand, while the ministering women pressed the other, or drew her close, understanding as only women can.

Rainbow Ben and his grim posse convoyed their four prisoners to Mirage. When the quartette had been placed under guard in a shack, Rainbow went to the telegraph office to send a message to his "boss."

"We got four spies on hand same as your specifications o' last evenin'," he dictated, and the operator took down the message. "The durned rep-tiles tried to blow up Number A. X. afore daylight this mornin.' They ain't jes' fust class now, bein' consid'able mussed up, but good yit fer hangin'!"

XV

KEEPING THE FAITH

WHEN the first fairies of sunrise hurried to waken the sleeping desert, their gossamer draperies caught upon the fearsome points of thorns and spines, and while solemn Joshua and bristling yucca glowed rose and amethyst, Cal loped through a land of fantastic, half-real shapes and colors. Riding up the long slope toward the northwest with the sun almost at her back, Marjorie watched curiously, then delightedly while the thorny growths blushed with eerie light. And when a faintly luminous rose spread over the breast of the desert, happy excitement drove the strained, grim look from Marjorie's face.

"Look, Cal! Look!" she exclaimed. "It's just as if the desert was—why! the old desert is blushing because the sun caught her asleep!" and she laughed at her whimsical fancy.

While Cal swiftly measured the distance to the summit the rose tints faded, and a gown of amber light draped the wastes, but as the sun climbed higher the desert donned her morning robe of luminous golden sunlight. Riding on with the wind in her face, the color tinged Marjorie's

cheeks, and she laughed at startled, scurrying cottontails, smiled at solemnly leaping jack rabbits moving just far enough to get safely out of Cal's way, and she watched excitedly for sight of a coyote.

On the valley's rim, where she had said goodby to Ramon, she reined in Cal, and even though the pinto stamped impatiently, she held him in, her gaze wandering over the valley, mountain, sky, while he turned this way and that. In its flowing robe of golden light the valley curved gently down to where the river's wash gleamed like a jeweled girdle.

Turning Cal, she rode slowly over the higher slopes, looking for Jerry's team. When her harvest had been completed she had turned them loose, for they were natives of the range, and could find a living in the sweeping desert pastures. But every day she placed a little feed for them in the corral she had built near the house, and they came to enjoy the grain or fodder. This kept them tame, trained them to come to the corral so that she could catch them when she wanted them again. But in the days following the attempt to blow up the troop train they had been forgotten, and in consequence had stopped coming and had strayed far—and now she needed them to help her answer the call to serve.

Over the long slopes she rode, slowly approach-

ing little bands of horses to find that those she sought were not among them. Sometimes the half wild horses lifted their heads suspiciously when they sighted her from afar, then turned and ran swiftly away, while Cal thundered after until Marjorie had drawn close enough to make sure that hers were not among the fleeing ones, to learn incidentally that all these bore the Circle Dagger brand.

Warned subconsciously that she was being watched, she turned Cal slowly, and her searching eyes found a rider sitting his horse like a statue beside a distant Joshua. Taking comfort in the feel of the automatic in the holster pocket of her chaps, Marjorie went on with her search. Keeping to the open spaces she watched warily, and her alarmed eyes noted that the strange rider kept pace with her.

Scorning to show fear, she went on, furtively watching, and when her disconcerting follower was crossing a space bare of any tall growth she suddenly wheeled Cal and faced her pursuer. Riding smoothly, he loped to where Joshuas formed a shield, then stopped in a group of the screening trees.

Slipping her hand into the holster pocket, Marjorie gripped her automatic, wondering what the man was trying to do, and doing her best to remember the coaching of Jerry and Rainbow

Ben. She had not been close enough to see the man's face at all. His horse was a bay cayuse, just like numberless others except to a trained rider's eyes, and Marjorie was not a desert rider. Puzzled, nervous over the threat implied by the other's strange actions, Marjorie rode on at last, hoping the mysterious rider would not follow. But when she turned again to look he was keeping pace with her, behind and to one side.

A jack rabbit leaping out of the way startled her, and when it stopped an idea flashed into her mind—in this strange, lonely contest of wits and pantomime, she would show her shadowlike pursuer that she was armed. Stopping Cal, she drew her automatic, and aimed deliberately at the jack rabbit sitting quietly upon his haunches. She did not exactly want to kill the rabbit, even though she aimed carefully, and when the automatic spoke with the peculiar viciousness of its kind she was almost relieved to see the rabbit bound away,—but while she watched, the rabbit ran near the mysterious rider, he drew with the almost invisible smoothness of the desert gunman, and when his six-gun boomed the rabbit leaped into the air and fell to the ground, dead—shot on the run!

When Marjorie rode on she was more than nervous, but determined. Her heart choked her, but anger came to warm her blood, while courage

held her eyes and hands steady. At last she sighted the horses she sought, grazing together, and her heart gave thanks as she approached closer and saw that they recognized Cal, and were making no move toward flight.

Drawing close, she gave Cal his way, and he soon had the pair headed for their Mirage Meadows corral at a brisk lope. Tensely watching, Marjorie saw her sinister pursuer swinging along, holding his place. But when she was still a mile from home he stopped his horse, and she rode on, victorious, but troubled. What did this weird test of her courage mean? Questions exploded within Marjorie's head until she was dizzy while she was putting up the horses, but when she went into the house she showed Lenore a smiling face.

"I found them!" she laughed, "and Cal rounded them up and brought them home on the run! I'll be right on the job in the morning."

And so the sun came to look for Marjorie each morning as he peeped into the valley, and morning after morning she smiled up at him while she worked under the desert skies, clearing another field beside the one she had been cultivating. Her muscles hardened by her life and work in the open, aided by the knowledge gained through experience, and with Jerry's strong team to help, she made rapid progress.

At last the cock quail greeted the sun with her each morning, and the wind piping in the daggers of the Joshuas brought color into her cheeks. She had not ridden out upon the open range again, and had heard nothing of her mysterious follower, but one morning while she was at work she turned to pick up a tool, and stepped back with a half-articulate exclamation, for a man was squatting on his heels on the ground directly behind her! She had heard no sound, but he was there, watching her, and she noted he was heavily armed.

"Why! good morning!" she said, breathless from her exertions and surprise. "I didn't hear you come—didn't know anyone was near, and you startled me."

But the man did not answer. Instead he looked at her, unblinking, the iris of his eyes expanding and contracting uncannily. Marjorie decided that he was a Mexican, or at least not an Indian of the district, and she watched his eyes, half-fascinated.

"How many men here?" he suddenly asked with a Spanish accent, his eyes wide open, but seeming to narrow to slits.

Marjorie turned to her work without answering, and he squatted upon his heels, watching.

"Where your man?" he spoke again, but Marjorie worked on.

"Huh! No no man here!" he observed. "I think you go away pretty soon!"

Disdaining to answer, Marjorie continued her work, and finally looked around to find that her strange visitor had vanished. Fearing that he might try to frighten Lenore, she hurried to the house. But Lenore came running to meet her, radiant, and led her inside. In the center of the table on their largest plate lay a very small egg!

"Our first egg!" enthused Lenore.

"What will we do with it?" laughed Marjorie. "It would be a shame for two full grown people to pick on an unprotected egg of that size!"

"Perhaps there will be some more in a few days, and then we can do something with them, if we are careful," Lenore answered gaily, and while they were laughing and planning, Rainbow Ben drove up.

"Here's a letter fer Miss Lenore," he announced, "an' I got a idee it's from Jerry! I was drivin' up to the dam today, so I jes' swung 'round this way to bring it."

The color tingeing her pale cheeks, Lenore took her letter in a hand which trembled, and Marjorie sent her into the house, while she kept Rainbow with the story of her visitor of the morning. Old

Ben's face was grim when she finished, and he clawed his scraggy chin whiskers.

"Anythin' else happened you ain't told me?" he rumbled.

In answer she described her experiences with her mysterious follower, explaining that she had not wanted to add unnecessarily to his worries, and so had not told him sooner.

"Mebbe that makes things a heap diff'rent, an' mebbe it don't," he considered. "You ought to have told me about this afore now. He didn't do nothin' a officer o' the law could arrest him fer, leastways he couldn't convict him o' nothin', but he done plenty a ole desert man could shoot him fer! But trouble is, you got to sight a *hombre* a'fore you kin shoot him! It's somethin' like hangin' that a'way."

"But why—what was he trying to do?" wondered Marjorie. "Of course I know he wanted to frighten me, but why?"

"I dunno," pondered Ben. "Somebody's persecutin' you, tryin' to drive you out, mebbe, er tryin' to scare you into somethin' else. It's happened a'fore this. Settlers drove out an' worse. An' the law has always been too slow. Sometimes it 'pears like the Guv'ment don't give a whoop what happens to settlers. I been tryin', God knows, but what is one man in this whole end o' the desert! Jes' a speck!"

"Do you think that—Wolf Vogel—" she hesitated.

"I looked him up right after them dynamiters tried to blow up the troops," Rainbow evaded, "but he had vamoosed. I wrote my boss about him, and they found he'd been livin' in Cajon fer weeks afore that, an' not tryin' to hide neither. He puzzles me some consid'able, an' he's got a new foreman, feller named Hernandez, come from down along the border. I got anxious to know somethin' 'bout him jes' as soon as I sighted him. This Hernandez is a right handy man in consid'able ways, most partic'lar with a gun! No one ever caught him doin' anythin' a-tall, but the law has been a heap int'rested in him for a long time," and Rainbow clawed his beard reflectively. "Say," he changed the subject, "d'you s'pose that hound of a Jerry said anything it would hurt fer me to hear? I been sort o' hopin'—"

As if in answer, Lenore came out, excitedly smiling.

"Jerry writes such a 'crazy' letter," she laughed. "He's been bombed by the Huns, but this is all he says about it: 'The confounded bomb tore down a railroad bridge we had been a month in building, but that wasn't the worst—the infernal thing wrecked our kitchen, and wounded the best cook

we ever had!' " she read aloud, and they laughed together, their eyes very bright.

Rainbow drove away, and Lenore sat down on the step beside Marjorie, and handed her the letter, blushing happily. Reading the little sheaf of pages Marjorie blinked back unbidden tears, for while Jerry wrote of himself and his experiences he made a joke of everything, but when his written thoughts turned to Lenore and to herself they came close in a fine, loving comradeship, and to the two girls sitting together on the steps of their little desert home he seemed to reach strong hands, hands which gripped theirs in a firm clasp of understanding courage.

But after a little each girl wanted to be alone with her thoughts, and Lenore went inside, while Marjorie turned back to her work under the desert skies.

"You tell him," she smiled whimsically up at the sun, "when you see him, that we're fighting, too! That we'll keep the faith!"

XVI

THE GHOSTLY RAIDER

AS IF they had caught the spirit of the people of the valley, the pullets began to lay. Their neat run in front of the laying house was fenced with wire so high that no coyote could jump it. Here Lenore fed them their grain night and morning, and provided them with water, but each morning the gate was opened and the flock ranged at will, finding the insects and countless things they craved for the hunting. And at night all came back in answer to Lenore's whistle, and when the gate was shut they were safe from the wily four-footed hunter of the desert.

The copper mine beyond the castle mountains was sending a stream of flashing ore to far smelters, and even though the rock was shipped and freight received upon a special switch miles down the track, the mine truck came twice each week to Mirage for the supplies which Major West furnished. To the old major, Lenore took the eggs, few or many, and he sent them to the mine with those which had been shipped in, paying desert prices—and the girls knew the joy of

an income from their land. It was only a little at first, but it was a beginning.

Marjorie worked steadily at her land clearing, and the new field grew and grew, Lenore, returning from working with the women in Honest John's brought her the news of the valley, news of those who had gone, as letters were received by this or that one from son or friend, and then at last came a letter from Ramon to Marjorie—a letter long in the mails, and the girls knew that he was overseas with the young men of "his people."

With no time to ride, Marjorie loaned Cal to Rainbow Ben, whimsically explaning that she knew the big horse wanted to serve. She knew Rainbow needed a good horse, that the better his horse the safer he would be, the more he could accomplish in his service as a lone deputy marshal, and that mounted upon Cal he had the advantage of any mounted marauder he might meet. Rainbow's eyes had lighted when she suggested it, but he had demurred, thinking she might need the pinto.

"Hawse," he addressed Cal when he finally surrendered to Marjorie's plan, "I know one thing fer sartin, I'm goin' to be in mighty good company! But we got a job, hawse, a real job!"

While Marjorie filled the weeks and months with achievement, Rainbow Ben rode long, lonely

leagues, he and Cal a speck on the billowing wastes beneath the limitless skies—for the law was only where they were.

The rains held off until it seemed there would be no rain, and Marjorie began dry plowing, following the example of the other settlers. The land was dry as powder, and a choking cloud of dust followed the plow. But she worked on, and with Jerry's team and plow to help her, she soon had the first field ready. And then came the breaking of the new land, a heartbreakingly hard task when it was so dry. She was only half through, and almost ready to stop entirely until some rain came, when Lenore returned from her Red Cross work in Mirage one day bringing a letter from Jerry to Marjorie. Eagerly opening the envelope, she was soon smiling.

"Listen!" she exclaimed. "He says: 'The mud is so deep a man has to stand on his own shoulders to see over it! And rain! Say, if you love me you'll wrap up a little piece of sunshine, and mail it to me! And you just watch this outfit hike for our valley when this muss is over! Believe me, we're all going to head for a place where the sky doesn't leak all the time!' " the letter ran on, and the sisters laughed, bright-eyed, thankful, while they read it again and again.

While the lack of rain worried the settlers, the girls found their anxiety tinged with comfort,

for their hens were laying splendidly, the egg account growing week by week, until it more than paid their simple living expenses. Old Rainbow gloried with them in their success, bragged far and near of it, far prouder of their little triumph than he could be of anything he had ever done or ever would do—and he came back to them with a new idea—turkeys.

"One o' the freight conductors runnin' through here has got a daughter livin' near Cajon that raises turkeys," he explained. "He says them turks eat grasshoppers an' all sorts o' bugs an' stuff, findin' must o' their grub right out on the range same as cattle. Then they can be sold in the early fall to be fed up fer Thanksgivin, in town, er fed out here. He says his gal makes more offen her turks than her husband does offen his ranch!"

"But we would have to get turkey eggs and some hens that wanted to set at just the right time," considered Marjorie, "and shipments are about as uncertain as the rain this year."

"You know, it's sort o' funny, but most everything comes home to roost, as the sayin' goes," he mused. "You ain't thought about it none, but they was a hull crew o' railroad men workin' Number A. X. the night she didn't git blowed up! An' they got good memories. Don't you worry none about shipments an' sech."

By the time the long delayed rains had come, Marjorie had decided to try Rainbow's plan. She ordered her settings of turkey eggs, and when Rainbow introduced her to the hard worked old freight conductor he assured her that the railroad men of Cajon would find the broody hens she needed, and that they would be delivered in Mirage when the time came, if they had to search from one end of the line to the other.

The planting went ahead with a rush, and Marjorie's days lasted from dawn to late dusk, but she got her crops in. When the setting eggs came the railroad men made good on their promise to find and deliver all the broody hens she needed—and soon contented hens were setting on one hundred and twenty-five turkey eggs.

The turkey eggs hatched well. Marjorie worked on in her fields, and in spite of the short rainfall the growing things thrived. The ranks of the turkeys thinned a little, as always, but the poults and chickens could hardly have grown more promisingly. And yet over the little home in Mirage Meadows and over every home in the valley hung a cloud, sinister, invisible, but clouding hearts in spite of sunlight and growing prosperity, for the Huns were advancing, the armies of civilization were falling back, fighting desperately, but being crumpled back.

Marjorie and Lenore had gone to bed, tired

from a long, long day of work in the open, when a weird cry pierced the night. Again it came, closer this time, while they watched from their dark sleeping porch. A third time the shriek mounted high—and then a shape, luminous, wavering, danced from Joshua to Joshua in the darkness.

Gripping her automatic in her right hand, Marjorie drew Lenore close with her left. Brighter glowed the shape, poising, dancing crazily, approaching, retreating, it seemed to fly through the air eight or ten feet above the ground. Through seconds which seemed processions of eternities the sisters watched, scarcely breathing. Then came the demonical shriek again, starting low down on the scale, but mounting higher and shriller until it seemed the cry of a lost soul—and the apparition vanished!

Hour after hour the sisters watched, sleepless, cold, while cattle came crowding about the house, bawling, charging, trampling, and only the welcome sun ended their vigil. While the girls, worn and wan, were repairing the damage the cattle had done to their poultry equipment, they saw Mrs. Harkness driving down the road below the house, on her way to Mirage. Intercepting her, Marjorie sent word to Rainbow, and returned to her work. After awhile she sent Lenore inside to take a nap, and worked on alone, too nervous

to think of sleep. But after lunch, with Lenore rested, she lay down and was soon asleep, and when Mrs. Harkness stopped on her way home she found both girls much refreshed.

"Rainbow says he will be here as soon as it gets dark," she told them. "He's waiting for night so that no one will see him come. If—if he wasn't coming, I would make you girls come home with me!"

"Don't worry about us," insisted Marjorie. "We'll be perfectly safe with Rainbow here, and perhaps this—perhaps he can solve this—mystery tonight! Did you hear any news?"

"The French are still being forced back," Mrs. Harkness told her sadly. "The Germans are striking straight for Paris. And they are very close!"

The girls finished their evening chores early, and had eaten their supper by the time the shadows surrounded their little home. They lit no lamp, waiting in the growing darkness. When the first blackness of night was deepest a whisper startled them, a whisper close to their window—but a moment later they were being comforted by old Rainbow.

"It's jes' me," he whispered. "I'm going' to stay out here, so's to git sort o' chummy with any ghost what shows up! Jes' wait quiet, an' don't worry none," he urged.

How long they waited the girls could never tell, centuries and moments seemed the same, but at last came the blood-chilling shriek in the black night. In spite of the fact that they knew Rainbow was near, the girls clung to each other, trembling because of overtaxed nerves. Again the weird cry mounted, fell, mounted again in piercing crescendo, drawing nearer, nearer.

Their eyes boring into the darkness the sisters watched, and suddenly the glowing shape flashed among the fantastic trees, advancing in a weird, flying dance. The cry, sounding like a demoniac's shriek of victory rang again and again while the fearsome thing of light danced closer. On it came. Where was Rainbow? the sisters asked themselves—and then a roar split the night, a booming chorus of defiance, and the weird shape wobbled crazily, then crashed down.

"Whoo-pee!" a cracked old voice rose in triunph. "Betsy got a ghost! Fust one I ever see!"

Peering from the window the girls saw the glowing shape lying in a heap, saw a shadow slipping toward it.

"Ye ain't dead yit, huh!" Rainbow cackled, cautiously approaching the luminous thing. In the light from the glowing object the watchers saw him pick up the remains of the "ghost" and start toward the house.

"Wasn't that yell a dandy!" he gave credit where it was due as he entered. "I don't know how them snakes turned it loose, but they had this thing on a pole, 'cause the pole is out there!" and he held up the object, laughable in the light of the lamp which Marjorie lit.

"It's jes' a long white sack with a face painted on near the top end o' it," he mused, "but let's see what makes her shine."

Turning the sack-like effigy wrong side out, he found a small electric flashlight, still shining brightly, and fastened to the inside of the top, just beneath the spot where the cord was attached which suspended the "ghost" from the pole.

"I wist I had shot a leetle lower," Rainbow mourned. "Betsey hit the pole, but if I had jes' give her the chance she might o' hit the rep-tile holdin' it! I'm jes' curious 'nough to want to see the color o' that snake's hair! I guess mebbe there was more'n one of 'em, but findin' 'em in the dark is somethin' one man cain't do, most 'specially when they is gittin' out o' here mighty fast! They run the cattle in here last night to hide their tracks. They won't do that tonight, an' we kin find out how many was in the party in the mornin'. But that won't do us much good.

"We've got the 'ghost,' but we—" began Marjorie, when Rainbow interrupted.

"All we know," he said, "is that somebody is

takin' a heap o' trouble to scare you out! Mebbe it's sort o' revenge, er jes' hate, er somethin' else, but we know who's doin' it! I'd give my right eye fer the proof!"

While they sat talking, wondering, there came to them the furious tattoo of a wildly running horse's hoofs. Straight on came the horse, and Rainbow went to the door.

"Rainbow! Girls! The damned Huns have been turned back!" a voice rang triumphant through the night, rang to the stars. "They just got the news at Mirage! Our troops waded into 'em at some place er other, an' there's a hell of a fight goin' on over there, but the Germans are headed back for Berlin!"

"Whoo-pee!" trumpeted old Rainbow, and Sarah and Betsy opened their black throats and joined in his triumphant shout, while Sim Watson rode on to spread the news, and the girls clung to each other, to Rainbow, laughing, crying.

XVII

ASHES OF DREAMS

WITH the turkey experiment an apparent success, Rainbow Ben stopped as often as he could to talk to Marjorie while she rested from her endless hoeing or cultivating, and always he urged her to consider digging a well, pointing out that the purchasing and hauling of enough water for her stock was already a serious item of expense, time, and labor. Her spring had gone dry at about the usual time, and already she was visioning a larger flock of turkeys for next year, and also materially increasing her flock of chickens.

More to please Rainbow than in the belief that she could actually dig her well herself, Marjorie started the pit, and when he came again it was to chuckle enthusiastically over her beginning, and to encourage her to go ahead. Working a little at a time, Marjorie sunk the shaft about five feet, and trued the walls up neatly. She was just climbing out with the aid of a ladder constructed by nailing slats across a plank when Rainbow appeared, his buckboard loaded with short lengths of heavy plank and a few stout timbers.

"I figgered you'd be needin' a leetle timberin'," he explained, "so I brung along some o' this junk that was layin' around my barn, stuff I picked up somewheres er got left over from some mine's freight. If you got time, we kin fix a nice curb, an' start the timberin' so's it'll be safe fer you to keep on goin' down."

They worked together for the rest of the day, and when Lenore came home from Mirage, she found the two hugely admiring their handiwork, and the new shaft neatly curbed, and timbered nearly to the bottom.

Marjorie's crops came along with a rush, and for many days she found no time to work in her well.

While hoeing her beans one day she noticed a horseman approaching. Mounted upon a magnificent bay horse, the man rode up to the end of the field near where she was working, lifting his sombrero, and called a pleasant greeting. When she answered he introduced himself as Jose Hernandez, foreman of the Circle Dagger, and while he spoke enthusiastically of her growing crops she studied him. He was darkly handsome in his silver trimmed leather chaps, dark soft shirt, and fine sombrero. He said nothing to which she could possibly take offense, did not presume to dismount or to enter her field, just paused after the custom of the open for pleasant greeting and com-

ment. But even while she answered him in kind a vague uneasiness grew within her, and when he turned his horse and galloped away her intuition told her that he was the mysterious rider who had followed her that day on the upper ranges!

Vaguely troubled, wondering what this call might presage, she returned to her hoeing. When Rainbow stopped for a moment on his way up the valley next day, she told him of her caller, and of her suspicions.

"Mebbe 'twas him," agreed Rainbow. "We cain't prove it, but we kin watch him. I been doin' that fer some time, but so fur as I kin find out he's been a right tame snake lately."

The harvest came on early, but it was a good harvest, the crops from her enlarged acreage overflowing her tiny barn, so that she hauled part of her kaffir corn to Jerry's, and stored it there. And while she worked Marjorie sang or hummed, for the news was good from over there, and every one of her acres had done its duty.

Her crops safely gathered, Marjorie relieved Lenore of all work in connection with the poultry, and spent as much time as she could in her well. Rainbow came with a windlass and bucket, borrowed from the Government supplies stored at the dam site, and set it up over the pit. It was slow work, but the soil seemed bottomless, and the digging was easy.

She sunk the pit twenty feet, and then the labor of climbing out to raise each bucket of dirt became too great for even her enthusiasm. She was wondering how to go ahead with the work, when a number of the men of the valley came to her, offering to exchange their labor for poultry which their wives wanted. And so the pit went down, with Marjorie at the windlass, and one or another of the men working in the bottom of the shaft, down forty, fifty, sixty feet—and then a bucket of wet earth came up. Bubbling with excitement, Marjorie emptied and lowered it. Next time it was full of mud—then it came time and again dripping water! When Lem Harkness climbed out of the pit he was wet, but grinning.

"You've struck it! An' she's a real well!" he enthused. "The water rose so fast in the pit it drove me out! I'll bet she's five feet deep now!"

Peering excitedly into the black hole, Marjorie could see nothing at first, but at last a sheet of silver glowed dully in the blackness far below, and she sang because she could not help it while she attended to her evening chores.

Major West found a buyer for the turkeys, and Marjorie shipped sixty of them. The old freight conductor told her of a windmill and tank he had found for sale in Cajon, second hand, but good for many years of service, and complete with

cylinder and plenty of pipe, and when the check came for the turkeys the mill was ordered. On the day the mill and equipment came, Rainbow Ben hauled it to Mirage Meadows, and early the next morning the men of the valley assembled, unbidden by the surprised girls, and while Marjorie and Lenore watched delightedly, their little pumping plant was installed. Before night the wheel was turning merrily and water was gurgling into the tank, and when the men rode homeward the sisters watched them go through eyes misty with happy tears, for the world was kind, very kind, and their dreams were coming true.

At last the long looked for letter came from Jerry—telling of his first battle. The western engineers had taken their place in the line as combat troops in time of dire need—but as a battle picture Jerry's letter was a disappointment.

"It was pretty hot for a while," he wrote, "but the toughest thing I had to put up with was the grub—had to live on dog biscuit for three days! But don't worry about me, for we're in a rest camp now, and we've got a *real* cook!"

Lenore went about her work at home or in the little Red Cross workroom in Mirage, her heart swelling with pride, but as the days went by and the news told of battle after battle, glorious news, but paid for with the blood of men and the hearts of women, she became more a spirit than ever.

Watching over her tenderly, Marjorie blessed Jerry for his thoughtfulness in writing frequently, and nearly always to Lenore. They knew in Mirage, as time went on, that Captain Stanley had been wounded, that two of the valley's young men had been found worthy to be offered upon the Altar of Humanity, that the Indian women on the Triangle Bar Ranch were chanting the death songs of their race—for Ramon's division was in the line, and four of the young men of his people would never ride again beneath the limitless skies of their desert.

Then on a morning Rainbow Ben and Cal came careening through the sunrise, Sarah and Betsy booming in a triumphant chorus as he stopped before each home and shouted that the war was over.

Forgetting everything else in their overwhelming joy, the people of the valley again turned their faces toward Mirage, singing and cheering as they drove into the little desert town just as the people of every town and hamlet in America were singing and cheering. Hernandez and his breed riders came, and as the hours wore on cowboys, miners, prospectors came hurrying from the east and north and south. While some filled the straggling street with wild feats of horsemanship or ringing whoops and booming reports, hymns of praise and thanksgiving rolled out of Honest

John's Saloon, to mingle in the desert's triumphant chorus of victory.

When at last the rejoicing people turned homeward, three thin columns of smoke far up the valley joined the sweeping slope with the limitless sky, and the hearts of Marjorie and Lenore seemed to cease to beat, while their smiling lips grew quiet, grim. Where was the fire? What was burning? Lashing her team into a gallop, Marjorie drove furiously, the spring wagon bumping and pitching as she led the line of racing vehicles over the rough, winding road.

As they tore on the flames leaped up—up—then slowly subsided, and every man and woman in the wildly racing wagons and buckboards knew that the fire was in Mirage Meadows! On and on Marjorie cruelly forced her team, the wagon seeming to fly in the wake of the madly running horses. Turning into their homestead they dashed on with the others pounding behind—and stopped—and the sisters stood together, white lipped, beside the smouldering pile of ashes which had been their home!

XVIII

HEARTS OF THE DESERT

THE pounding of hoofs and the rattle and rumble of wheels shattered the silver stillness of the sunlit desert afternoon, while the madly racing settlers dashed up to the heaps of dying embers. Dry-eyed, speechless, the sisters clung to each other, while women hurried to them to sustain them with loving hearts, and men looked in grim silence from the smouldering ruins of the little home to the blackening embers marking the spots where barn and poultry house had stood.

Of the little farmstead, builded by toiling hands working eagerly with visioning hearts through the years, only the windmill stood with its steel tower and tank, the wheel hanging motionless against the breathless sky. The harvested crops stored in the barn, and the dry fodder piled against it were gone, and homeless turkeys and chickens scuttled here and there in their fright. Clothing, household goods, all the personal treasures which had once belonged to Marjorie and Lenore, except what they were wearing or had with them, were ashes.

"Stand back, an' don't tromp around none!" called Rainbow, arriving last because he had been watching the cowboys, and news of the fires had been slow in reaching him. "Lem, you an' Jim come help me look fer tracks."

While the three began a minute examination of the ground close to where the house had stood, excited speculation swept through the little group of watchers. Their lives were hard, bare, they knew that the loss meant something more than heartache, knew that it meant facing the grim, material necessities, and they wondered if Marjorie and Lenore would start again—could possibly start again. And while they wondered their hearts went out to these two, and they wished for the power to do many things, but all they had to offer was their sympathy and the work of their hands.

Rainbow and his assistants went slowly from the site of the house to the ashes of the barn, then to the embers of the poultry house, and finally to a group of Joshuas standing perhaps one hundred yards away, and from the trees to the road. For a time they studied the road, but at last turned back.

"It was set by a—" Rainbow swallowed the word which rose to his lips, and the effort seemed to choke him, "—the fires was set by a—by somebody wearin' moccasins!" he told the waiting

group. "He went in the back door o' the house, an' he come out the front, then went to the barn, an' touched off the chicken house last," he continued his interpretation of the tracks. "Then he went over to them trees where he had tied his horse, an' the cayuse was unshod, an' they ain't a mark on any one o' his feet. That *hombre* shore thought o' everything! Then he rode down there a ways, an' turned into the road—an' we covered his tracks fer him when we come tearin' up!

"We was celebratin', an' Mirage sort o' faces t'other way, an' nobody saw the fires till you folks started home, but I figger they had been burnin' a right smart spell afore you sighted 'em. The rep-tile had this hull end o' the valley to hisse'f —not a pusson to bother him er even see him, an' he ain't left a clue.

"It's the doin's of the devil himself!" whispered Ed Squires.

"He's sort o' stickin' to this homestead then!" old Rainbow answered grimly. "I've heard a heap o' him," he went on laconically, "an' I allus had a sort o' curiosity to meet up with him! Bein's he seems to be hangin' 'round here, this looks like my chance! I'll jes' hang around too! You folks better go home."

"You'll come with us, of course," Mary Harkness urged Marjorie and Lenore.

"Yes, you gals go along with Mary an' Lem," Rainbow added, taking a hand of each of them in his rough old fingers. "I'll ride up to Jerry's an' git some o' that stuff you stored in his barn, an' feed yer chickens an' turks, an' in the mornin' you kin come back an' plan what to do."

"I—we—we haven't the money to build—to start all over again," Marjorie choked, turning so that she faced him, her eyes begging his for strength, "but we—"

"It ain't startin' *all* over ag'in," he interrupted. "It's mighty nigh like it, mighty nigh it, but this is goin' on! Mebbe it's harder than startin' was, but you're goin' on, o' course! In the mornin' we'll sort o' figger a way. You come down when Lem comes, an' we'll figger a way!"

"I'll be here," she promised, gripping his old hand tightly, and he helped the girls into the wagon.

Rainbow fed the chickens and turkeys as he had promised, and then as long as the light lasted he grimly studied the desert.

"I wisht I knowed who was in them moccasins," he mused aloud, studying the tracks on the ground. "Hernandez an' his hull crew o' riders was in town all day, come in early. I made partic'lar sartin o' that, 'cause somethin' made me sort o' curious 'bout 'em." The shadows grew deeper while he pondered, and soon he was alone

with the stars. "I shore would like to meet up with whomsoever had a hand in this," he confided to the darkness, and began his night-long vigil while the valley held its breath.

When Sim Watson appeared early next morning, bringing the hot breakfast his wife had sent Rainbow, he found the old freighter sitting in the sun, communing with Cal.

"Not a thing's happened yit," Rainbow complained in answer to Sim's query. "I sort o' hoped whoever'd done this would drift around to see how their scheme was workin', er mebbe start somethin' else, but if he did he was plumb invisible! I was jes' tellin' Cal I was so plumb mystified that I didn't know nothin' when you come."

As the sun climbed higher the other men came, and when Marjorie appeared with Lem she found them carefully sifting the ashes. The larger pieces of unconsumed debris had been collected and piled at one side, and Jim Burton was carefully saving every piece of melted or heat twisted metal or bit of crockery which the sieve separated from the ashes.

"How's Miss Lenore?" Rainbow asked, leading Marjorie aside.

"She is—wonderful!" Marjorie answered, her chin quivering. "We planned and planned most of the night, and even though it seems—though

we don't know how we can do it—we're going to stay!" she went on, her eyes holding his.

"O'course ye are!" he agreed, gripping her hand tighter. "I knowd it all the time! Why! if—if you gals was to go away the sun would quit shinin' fer—fer one ole mule skinner anyways! I snuk around all night, but nothin' happened, so I been figgerin' quite a bit, an'—"

"Lenore said you would—help us find a way," she interrupted huskily. "We have some money. The hens had been laying well, and we had saved a little. Then there was a tiny bit of the turkey money left after I paid for the windmill. But we have to have clothing, and a stove and bedding and furniture and about everything! And because we have to depend upon the hens to support us, we will have to fix some sort of a place for them at once. Lenore figured out what we will absolutely have to have. We have enough money to buy some working clothes, and the material for the chicken house. But after that everything is—just sort of isn't!" she smiled wanly.

"Things does look that a-way, mebbe, but we'll figger a way, honey, we'll figger a way," he comforted. "Now you round up yer chickens an' turks, while I take a squint at what Jim's findin'."

Just before he finished Marjorie jumped at a touch upon her arm, but a moment later she was hugging Cal, hiding her face against his neck,

while he reached his long nose around to give her little comforting pokes, and old Rainbow left them together while he went back to the busy men. Comforted by the presence and affection of the pinto, Marjorie turned to the duties which lay before her. Gathering the drinking pans of the poultry, she took them to the faucet below the tank, washed them, and placed them, freshly filled, in the shade of Joshua trees. With Cal following, she got some of the grain which Rainbow had brought from Jerry's, and rounded up her flock. Finding no more work for her hands, she and the pinto watched the men.

"Did you have anythin' o' Jerry's?" Rainbow asked at last, looking up from the inspection of all the articles, or rather remnants of articles salvaged.

"We had his spurs, and his guns, and—"

"I thought so," Rainbow interrupted. "They was a mighty fine pair o' spurs—an' they ain't here! They ain't nothin' here that could 'a' been them! An' his guns is gone too!" he announced, and they were all silent a moment. "That's about the hull o' our findin's, er lack o' 'em. What's left o' your leetle automatic is here, an' pieces o' all sorts o' stuff," he finished, and all joined in speculation as to the identity of the firebug and thief.

Promising to sleep on the place that night,

Rainbow sent Marjorie home with Lem. When she was out of sight the other men began shoveling the ashes into a wagon and hauling them away, and Rainbow saddled Cal and loped toward Mirage. Just before sunset he came back, driving his long team of eight mules, and with his largest wagon loaded with long, heavy beams, while Cal followed behind. Drawing closer he nodded with satisfaction, for the sites of the three little buildings had already been cleaned of debris, and leveled.

"You boys show up early in the mornin'," he urged as the others departed.

Unharnessing and feeding his mules, he prepared and ate his supper in the open, and spread his blankets on the ground. Pulling off his boots and part of his clothing, he placed Sarah and Betsy just where he wanted them, and wearily went to bed while Cal sniffed the blankets.

"I ain't got no proof, Cal," he addressed the pinto, "but I'd bet both eyes an' one leg that I know who done this! Yes, sir, I'd bet 'em all!" and while Cal watched, old Rainbow slept beneath the stars.

Very early the next morning Rainbow drove his long team and heavy wagon to the knoll in the grove of Joshuas, and stopped beside Jerry's house. He had been there only a few minutes when Sim Watson rode up, and then Jim Burton

and Ed Squires, followed in turn by Pete Nellis, Henry Hughes, Mike Dowd, Art Blake, and Joe Farmer. With picks and shovels they undermined the corners of Jerry's strong foundation of redwood beams, placed Rainbow's heavy wagon jacks in the holes, and jacked up the house. Blocking up the little building as they lifted it, as housemovers do, they raised it until it was higher than the bolsters on the big freight wagon.

Disconnecting the reach of the running gear, one pair of wheels was put in place in front of the house, and the other back of it, and the reach spliced beneath the building. Then strong beams were slipped under the house, their ends resting on the bolsters of the lengthened wagon, and with the aid of the jacks the building was lowered into place on the timbers. When braces had been put into place, and all had been firmly lashed, Rainbow hooked the team to the wagon again, and called to his leaders. The lead mules bobbed their heads up and down, setting the bells on their hames jingling the signal and the long team stepped forward together, and the little home rolled toward Mirage Meadows to the merry jingling of the bells.

Walking beside his wheelers, guiding his team by spoken commands, Rainbow piloted the house upon its pilgrimage, while the others hurried

ahead to see that everything was ready at the site. Driving with the wonderful skill of the long-line desert freight skinner, Rainbow kept the wheels of his wagon out of the ruts and on level ground, to stop his laboring team at last with the house directly over the spot it was destined to occupy. Reversing the process of loading, the men lowered the house into place, tamped the ground around the sills—and it appeared to have been built where it stood.

The others hurried back to Jerry's to carefully take his barn to pieces, for, because of the way it was built and its size, they could not move it otherwise. Rainbow was making ready to follow them with his wagon when Marjorie and Lenore came into view, driving Jerry's team. Old Rainbow watched from behind his wheel mules, and when the girls first saw the house he thought they were going to stop—but an instant later they were coming on as fast as the team could travel.

"Rainbow!" called Marjorie as she stopped in front of the house, and he came from behind the mules. Both the girls tried to speak as he reached his hands to help them down from the wagon, but the words would not come. "We had no right to take—Jerry's house!" Marjorie protested when they stood together, but her eyes were bright, and Lenore was smiling at Rainbow through quick, happy tears.

"I knew you would find a way!" she whispered.

"Oh, Rainbow!" choked Marjorie, hugging one of his arms, "you are so good to us! Everyone helps—"

"Me!" gulped Rainbow. "Why, honey, I was jes' savin' my hide! The night Jerry went away he told me that if I didn't—didn't sort o' keep a eye on you gals he'd—well! it was plenty what he promised me! An' he'll be comin' home afore long now, an' if I didn't—don't you see," he argued desperately, wishing he could run, "I was jes' savin' my hide!"

"I see—God bless your—your hide!" exclaimed Marjorie laughing and crying at the same time, and holding him tighter.

"Have you gals got the key?" he wondered uneasily, "er was it—"

"I have it," Lenore told him, a soft light growing in her eyes while a delicate blush tinged her cheeks.

"I got to go now," Rainbow released his arm. "You gals go on in an' git settled, while we move the barn."

Before another sun had set the barn had been moved and set up in its new location, and the part of her crops which Marjorie had stored in it were hauled down and again placed under its roof. But the house which had served well enough as

a bachelor's home, though furnished with all they absolutely needed, was not large enough for the girls to be comfortable in, and while they were thankful and happy, Rainbow was not content. He talked and fussed, and a few days later his long team came marching to the jingling bells of the leaders, winding through the desert growths, another cabin lashed to the beams stretched between the wheels of the big freight wagon. To the excited girls he explained that it had belonged to the Seeleys, a family whom they remembered, but who had abandoned their homestead long before, after a very short residence.

"They ain't got no claim on that land," he went on, "an' I dunno who owns this shack. But jes' so's you could rest easy, I had Major West an' Lem figger how much it's wuth, an' sometime, if you ever hear tell o' them Seeleys, you kin pay 'em. This shack ain't as big as Jerry's, an' it's empty, o' course, but it's a good shack, an' it'll make a fust class bedroom fer you gals. You kin spread out yer stuff more, an' fix things as if you was plannin' to stay a while."

As if springing from the desert, the volunteer movers appeared. The smaller cabin was placed against the other one just where the girls wanted it, a door cut, and while the sisters excitedly inspected their new possession the volunteers vanished into the desert.

"Even Rainbow got away without our telling —" mourned Marjorie, then paused a moment. "Words wouldn't—tell them what is in my heart anyway!" she smiled at last. "They know—that's why they all disappeared—bless them!"

When Marjorie had finished sweeping, scrubbing, and washing windows, the girls rearranged the furniture, and Jerry's two-room shack had grown into a three-room home. Marjorie bought the material for the new chicken and turkey quarters, and sawed and hammered an accompaniment to her overflowing happiness through the sun-silvered hours.

On the day before Thanksgiving the last staple was driven, the last nail hammered home, and the girls strolled about their re-born farmstead, too thankful for speech. And on Thanksgiving Day old Rainbow Ben arrived as the honored dinner guest of the little Mirage Meadows home. In the mail he brought to them from the post office the girls found letters from both Jerry and Ramon, and even though old Rainbow fussed, and scolded them for going to so much work in preparing such a feast for him, the only persons in the world happier than he, were the two girls who sat with him at the table.

Since the day of the fire the valley had been

quiet, and as time went by and nothing untoward happened, the people went about their work as usual. But the men had not forgotten, and Rainbow asked for a warrant which would enable him to legally search the premises of the Circle Dagger Ranch.

When the warrant came he had his posse ready. With the other men of the valley stationed around the ranch headquarters, and with Lem Harkness, Jim Burton, and Sim Watson with him, Rainbow rode up to the long, low house at one end of the quadrangle of barns, bunk houses, and homes of the breeds and their women. The breed riders hurried to challenge them, but found themselves facing black-mouthed guns.

"They ain't a-goin' to be no trouble," Rainbow announced with finality, "we'll see to that!"

Herding the breeds into a line against a building, they disarmed them, and Rainbow left Sim Watson to guard the ugly group while he entered the house with Jim and Lem. Going through every room in the long building quickly, and finding no one except a comely brown girl, they took her to where Sim was guarding the men, and then rapidly searched every shack and building on the place—but found no sign of Vogel—and they were not foolish enough to ask the breeds where he was.

After consultation they took the brown girl for

a guide, and searched through the house again, sifting the contents of every room with eyes and hands. The brown girl was willing enough to indicate the various rooms, and led them from one to another, finally to one she announced as the bedroom of Jose Hernandez—a fact quickly proven by old letters found in a desk and by finding clothing which the desert men remembered seeing him wear. Rainbow stopped, discouraged, baffled—and his eyes wandered here and there, searching—to pause upon a pair of spurs lying on a littered table. Then his gaze moved on, studiedly guarded.

"I guess we was mistaken," he said to the girl. "I didn't see Hernandez outside. Where is he? I'd sort of feel better if I could apologize to him, bein's he's the boss here."

"He is gone three days," she told him frankly, smiling with pleasure at the change in his manner and voice.

"When's he comin' back?" asked Rainbow in apparent friendly interest.

"I do not know—and Juan, the chief *vaquero,* he does not know!"

The girl's eyes grew darker with fright as she watched the grim change in Rainbow's face. Picking up the spurs he turned to the others.

"These are Jerry's!" he said, "stolen from the girls' house the day it was burned! This is

Hernandez's room. He was in Mirage all that day. It ain't plain to me yit—but we want him!"

For hours they searched, questioned, and searched again—but the girl had told the truth—Hernandez had vanished!

XIX

THE HANDS OF HATE

THROUGH the slow spun fabric of the passing days the bright fingers of hope wove a golden thread of dreams for Lenore. In her chair by the window, her hands folded in her lap, her eyes wandered over the castle mountains as if watching thoughts soaring into the far blue of the limitless skies stretching on beyond the end of the world. Since her girlhood, life had meant days of service to others for her. Even after her failing health had forced her to relinquish her role as the breadwinner, and the task of providing the necessities of life had fallen upon Marjorie's strong young shoulders, Lenore's hands had never been idle, for the countless tasks of homemaking has been theirs.

But the reaction from the long months of waiting, of hope tinged with dread, rushed over her in the days when her hands were no longer called to serve. Her voice grew hoarser, became scarcely more than a whisper, she grew more fragile, but uncomplaining, gentle, she waited, her dreams wandering beyond the far horizons.

"I have thought so often lately of something

Ramon used to say," Lenore said one morning as they were sitting together. "He called me 'the spirit of the desert stars,' you remember. I like that, and sometimes I feel so—so like a spirit! I have felt that way ever since Jerry went away—when I was thinking of him, I mean. And many times I feel and think as if I were his—his mother! And then I seem to be your mother, too! I do not know where such queer thoughts come from, but in them I am always happy. When I dream about Jerry's coming home it seems as if —I just feel a heavenly gladness—and that I will never have any more pain—or—or anything but happiness! I can't seem to see very much of what is to come after—" she paused, smiling, for Rainbow Ben had appeared in the open door. "Come in, Rainbow," she welcomed him. "We were just talking about Jerry. Do you think he will be changed much when he comes home?"

"Changed?" considered old Rainbow, his wise old eyes flashing from Lenore to Marjorie while he took a chair. "He couldn't be changed fer the wuss!" he announced.

"Oh, Rainbow!" exclaimed Lenore, laughing her low, soft laugh, "you ought to be ashamed! I know you like him—think everything of—"

"Jes' 'cause I like him ain't to reason to s'pose he ain't wuthless!" interrupted Rainbow. "I been 'sociatin' with meules an' lizards an' rep-

tiles so durn long I sort o' like 'em—the ornerier they is the better I like 'em, an' it's plain scandalous how much I think o' Jerry!" he chuckled. "Speakin' o' him sort o' reminds me o' somethin'," he grinned. "Seems to me I brung out a couple o' letters from him to somebody out this way—mebbe 'twas you gals!" he went on, searching through his pockets, while the laughing girls begged him to hurry. "Yes, here they be!" he announced, producing two letters, "one apiece fer you!"

Rainbow waited, hoping they would share the impersonal news with him, while the girls excitedly read their letters. When Lenore finished she turned back to the first line to read hers again more slowly, but Marjorie, her eyes bright and the color tingeing her cheeks called to the others to listen, and eagerly shared parts of hers with them.

" 'I'm coming straight to the valley,' " she read, " 'as soon as I'm free. That's home! And in my case that also means that my job is there. But a lot of the fellows are wondering—they haven't even as much of a farm as I have—and they are wondering about their jobs. We've heard something about a plan through which the Government is to back a man who wants to make a home on the land, and that idea has certainly gotten under the skin of a lot of fellows in this

outfit! My little old homestead looks better than ever. You see I sort of had a home to fight for, a little speck of my country belonged to me, or I belonged to it. You know what I mean, Marjorie, even if I can't say it straight.

" 'I have run across a lot of fellows in different outfits who sort of have to look back to a furnished room and a lot of paved streets full of people when they try to visualize their country. Good people, good towns, and everything all right, but none of it belongs to these fellows I'm talking about. They have been sort of parts of a machine. Some of them want to get right back to that, and they are wise if that is what they like—but this idea of a little home on the land measures up just about right to a lot of others—just about up to their hearts. Some of them have been dreaming about just that for a long time. They don't expect it to be given to them—they just want an even chance to work out their salvation on their land. They ask me about it, and pump the others from our valley, and talk about it all the time. I'll bet Rainbow's right eye that we have a regular epidemic of soldiers in Mirage as soon as this man's army gets home!" she looked up, laughing.

"Seems to me he's gittin' sort o' careless with my pussonality—bettin' my right eye that a-way," protested Rainbow. "Well, I'll git even with

him! I'll bet both his laigs that you cain't guess who I got a letter from!" he challenged, and then went on, when they had "given up." "From Captain Stanley!" he announced. "He's back, an' what's more, he's fixin' to come here right away!"

Leaving the girls excitedly discussing the news, Rainbow rode away on business which worried him. Days and weeks of searching and watching had failed to uncover the slightest trace of either Wolf Vogel or Hernandez. Since the day of the fire nothing sinister had happened in the valley, and the people were calm, but held themselves ready for anything which might come. But the finding of Jerry's spurs in Hernandez's room in spite of the fact that Hernandez had been in Mirage all the day of the fire, coupled with the mysterious disappearance of both Hernandez and Vogel, kept Rainbow hunting grimly with the assistance of Lem and the others.

Marjorie worked in her field as much as possible, clearing a little more land to make sure that she would have twenty acres in crop in the spring, and be able to make final proof on her land, and get title to it from the Government. The pullets were later in starting their laying than she expected, but the hens seemed happy in their new quarters, and when the pullets finally started lay-

ing the eggs from the enlarged flock brought in a modest, but steadily growing income.

Captain Stanley arrived for a short visit of inspection, and when he stopped in to see the girls he was full of his plans for beginning work on the dam just as soon as possible.

His inspection completed, Stanley departed for a consultation with his chief. The dying year, hurrying to complete its destined number of days, brought Christmas. The knowledge that work was soon to be resumed on the dam drove every cloud from the hearts of the valley's people, even though Rainbow, Lem, and Jim Burton refused to cease their grim search, and the Christmas spirit glowed brighter than ever in the scattered homes. The new year soon brought Captain Stanley and his wife, Rainbow summoned a crew of men, and the camp below the dam site was partially reconstructed. Other men came to join the engineer, assistants, construction foremen, mechanics, cooks, and a storekeeper, followed in turn by a carload of Mexican laborers, the only kind to be had on the desert just then.

But the camp grew slowly, for there was much to be done before actual construction of the dam could begin. The debris which had collected about the completed foundation was cleared away, and through days and weeks mechanics were busy overhauling engines, rock crushers, pumps, con-

crete mixers, hoists, and all the machinery of the project. The construction of the wooden forms and the woven net of reinforcing steel, the false work which had to be completed before the pouring of the concrete began, had to wait until the floods following the winter rains had passed, for a single flood would sweep away the work of weeks in a moment. But John Stanley and his men worked on, following the plans of his carefully laid out campaign, which would find them ready the moment it was safe to proceed.

Her cleared land accurately measured through the assistance of the engineers, and found to exceed the required twenty acres, Marjorie eagerly waited for the first rains, as did every other settler in the valley. While she waited she worked a part of each day in the office of the camp, but this year, as soon as the rains came, her land would need all her time—for her ranch was paying! With a new flock of turkeys in prospect, and her poultry plans enlarging all the time, hungry beaks would be waiting to transform all the feed she could raise into eggs and meat—into success! And their ever nearing success, their hard won victory, filled the hearts in the little Mirage Meadows home with joy, and with humble thankfulness.

The hoped-for rains were still of tomorrow when material began to arrive for the dam—a car

of mules and several of equipment, lumber, a little steel, and again Rainbow was busy supervising the freighting. Straggling in by ones or twos, discharged soldiers came seeking work, wondering if their chance to win a home on the land was a rainbow dream or a fighting man's chance. And every one found John Stanley waiting for him, smiling his quizzical smile, putting them to work, seeming to be everywhere, a little more frail, a little older than when he had turned from his labors of building up a country, of creating, to the labor of destruction, but seemingly as tireless as ever.

At last the cloud-fleets deeply laden with rain made port in the valley, and the lightning came to help them discharge their blessings upon the waiting land. Through the growing days Marjorie followed her plow while Jerry's strong team drew it across her fields, the point biting deep and the crumbly soil flowing over the mouldboard in a grating stream, leaving the land bright and fair, pregnant with promise, while the sun smiled upon his valley.

With ever-growing frequency the laden cars were left on the Mirage switch to be unloaded. More laborers, Mexican and all other kinds, came to swell the growing camp. Mirage again stirred sleepily, then awoke to its new day.

The clouds of sinister mystery which had hung

over the valley for so long seemed forgotten. But even though they no longer threatened, Marjorie and Lenore could not forget them, and Rainbow did not. Grimly, unswervingly, he searched on, urged on his "boss"; and though the valley might forget, there were men who had never seen it who had not forgotten, working secretly, tirelessly, bits of their reports reaching Rainbow through his "boss." But it seemed to end in complete mystery. Jose Hernandez and Wolf Vogel seemed to have vanished into the air.

Hoping for news from the secret service, Rainbow went for his mail, and received a letter. His wrinkled old face glowing, he hurried outside to read it alone. His eyes hurried over the lines on the single page in an unbelieving daze. But when he had read it again carefully, as if to convince himself, he suddenly charged into the street where Cal stood saddled.

"Cal! Look!" he whooped, holding up the letter. "Jerry's back in the ole U-nited States! He's comin' home!" he exclaimed huskily. "He's comin' home. Why don't you kick somebody er somethin'! Ain't you glad er nothin'!" and he turned to gallop back on his old legs, his spurs jingling a joy-dance while he hopped about the post office in the general store, demanding to know if there was not a letter for one of the girls. Major West found one for Lenore, and followed

Rainbow to the door, a queer smile crinkling the lines of his face as he watched Cal flying out of sight up the valley as if his hoofs were winged.

Seeing him coming, Marjorie ran to the house, and was waiting with Lenore when he slid Cal to a stop, sprang from the saddle, and extended a letter to Lenore, his throat working oddly but no words leaving his lips. With trembling fingers Lenore opened her letter, and a moment later she was sobbing in Marjorie's arms. But when she lifted her face her eyes shamed the desert sun. She whispered something to Marjorie, and Rainbow watched in consternation while they both cried with joy. Walking around to Cal's head, he looked the big horse in the eye.

"Ain't wimmin hell!" he demanded. "This ain't no place fer me an' you! We got to git, an' git quick!"

But before he could make a move toward mounting both girls seized him, holding his old hands and dancing around him, while Cal watched curiously, and then nosed Marjorie to remind her that he was also there. When Marjorie stopped to hug Cal, Lenore read her letter again.

"Dreams do come true, Rainbow!" she whispered. "They do! They do! if you just dream them hard enough!"

"It won't be long," promised Rainbow. "He'll

be comin' most any time! We can't tell jes' when, but I'll meet every train! Don't you gals worry about meetin' him, I'll have a rig waitin', an' send him right up! Mebbe he won't need much sendin'!" he chuckled.

The days of the rest of the week seemed at once to be dragging eternities and glowing moments of bright dreams to Lenore. On Saturday the little home was made brighter than ever, and though neither knew that Jerry would come that day, or even dared to truly expect him, Marjorie ruled that Lenore should wear her new white frock. All day she waited, smiling, delicate, beautiful—but Jerry did not come.

The next morning the sisters finished their breakfast early, excitedly dusted and garnished the little home, and while Lenore went into the bedroom to put on her simple dress, Marjorie hurried out to care for her poultry. Half an hour later Lenore, happy dreams darkening the blue of her eyes, came out of her room singing softly —but in the doorway the tune died on her lips, and her eyes opened wide with horror—for she stood face to face with Wolf Vogel!

Unable to move, she poised an instant, then tried to call to Marjorie, but his great hands closed over her throat, bruising its fragile whiteness, and she struggled helplessly, a mouse in the claws of a tiger.

Her work finished, Marjorie hurried back to the house, something calling her which she could not name. Hearing her footsteps, Vogel gripped Lenore's throat tighter, and lifted her with him as he stepped noiselessly back of the door in his moccasined feet.

Running in, Marjorie called, but turned in alarm when the door slammed behind her, then stood for an instant as if life, hope, all, had left her.

"Stop! In God's name stop!" she cried in agony.

"Beg!" he sneered, his face horrible with his hate and passion. "I told you I'd make you beg! Beg!"

XX

THE WOLF'S DEN

MIRAGE stirred drowsily, heavy with Sunday morning sleep. The new sun spread draperies of luminous gold over the couch of the desert, and the warm, dry air drifted in lazy breezes. Two horses, saddled but seemingly left to their own devices, stood near the railroad station. On the platform Rainbow Ben jingled up and down, his skinny old legs encased in leather chaps, his two six-guns in their holsters, his deputy marshal's badge flashing star-like as he turned impatiently this way and that.

Straight out of the sun a long train came roaring, and Rainbow clawed his beard as he watched its approach. On and on it came, hesitated as if in surprise, then ground to a stop while drowsy eyes peered from behind the lifted curtains of Pullmans. Rainbow watched while most of the train slid past him, then hurried along beside it toward where the conductor was swinging down. From the rear platform of the last car a man alighted, a tall, bronzed man in overseas cap and uniform, and with his belongings in pack and blanket roll. Dropping the pack he quietly hur-

ried after Rainbow, overtook him, and gripped him from behind. With cat-like quickness and surprising strength Rainbow's skinny old arms slipped out of the hold, as he wheeled.

"Jerry! you—you durned horned toad!" he cried, his old face glowing, his eyes blinking fast, while he reached both hands for the strong grip of the soldier, and one of the horses standing near, a great pinto, lifted his magnificent head, his ears forward.

"Mornin', Rainbow," Jerry masked his emotion until the train rumbled away, and then exploded: "Why! you snake-hearted old—" but at the sound of his voice a glad whinney rang through the morning and the pinto charged onto the platform and rushed to the two men, nickering while he nosed the soldier. "Cal!" Jerry called hoarsely, and with his arm around the big horse's neck he whispered many things while Cal nickered, nibbled at his clothing, and at last broke away to muzzle his master's cheek. For a few minutes the two men talked to the horse while they mastered their own emotions, and then studied each other, smiling.

"Why this concentration of artillery?" asked Jerry, noting the brace of six-guns. "Don't you know the war's over?"

"It ain't finished here yit!" Rainbow answered,

"but me an' Saray an' Betsy aim to sort o' end it this mornin'!"

"What do you mean?" Jerry demanded, his eyes level, his voice quiet, but anxious. "Has there been trouble around—"

"Trouble!" old Rainbow echoed. "Jerry, them gals up yonder is sech plumb thoroughbreds that they make me an' you look like yaller whelps! Why! trouble has been their main address! But they said you had worries 'nough without worryin' 'bout them, an' they didn't tell you, an' they wouldn't let me tell you."

While Cal nosed one or the other, greedy for attention as always, Rainbow briefly sketched the story of the war in the valley and the persecution of the girls in particular.

"Last night there was a man on Number Eleven, goin' east, as had a package o' papers fer me," he went on to explain, "an' they was the conclusions o' the Secret Service in this here case. They caught Hernandez when he was tryin' to slip across the border into Mexico, an' he talked, an' that he'ped 'em to git some others. Out of 'em all they got things sort o' untangled. I always called Wolf a snake, but since I got these here papers I been feelin' like apologizin' to every snake on the desert!" he went on. "He was plumb bad with wimmin, an' *to* wimmin, an' these Secret Service rep-tiles figger that when he found Mar-

jorie livin' in the desert with jes' Miss Lenore, he wanted her, an' schemed to git her, an' when she ordered him off it made him so plumb wild he went locoed. Ain't no doubt it was him tried to kidnap her that Christmas Eve when she was comin' from Jim Burton's, an' when we made him stop them tactics he was wilder'n ever, even more dangerous than ever. You see, he'd been runnin' things around here his way, his riders doin' things an' throwin' the blame on some pore settler, an' keepin' every homesteader s'picious o' all the rest. They all hated Wolf, but things kep' happenin'—stole wire turnin' up near another man's place, an' all sech as that, an' they didn't trust each other. So Wolf had things his way. An' then along come these gals, an' sort o' shined into folkses hearts—an' the fust thing we knowed we was a pa'cel o' friends an' neighbors! An' Wolf was licked right thar! An' he knowed it! An' since then he's been wild to git revenge on them gals. Hernandez says Wolf hated 'em so he was willin' to *pay* anythin', er *do* anythin' to drive 'em out, er break their hearts, er even kill 'em! Seems Wolf took mighty good care to live prominent in the city, but they've got proof now that he was settin' in the game the time them troops wasn't blowed up! Then he hired Hernandez, an' after a leetle while slipped up here to put things through hisse'f. Hernandez was willin' to do all kinds o'

devilment up to a sartin p'int, like follerin' the girls, an' scarin' 'em with ghosts, but he wouldn't go no further. He says it was Wolf as set the girls house an' sech on fire! I knowed it, but I couldn't find Wolf. Hernandez got cold feet an' lit out, an' I s'pose Wolf put your spurs in Hernandez' room to throw us offen the trail."

"But where is Wolf?" demanded Jerry, his eyes and voice level, cold. "Haven't you any trace of him?"

"I'm jes' comin' to that," explained Rainbow. "You know them three wells on the Circle Dagger?"

"Yes, they are almost in line, and all big pits," agreed Jerry.

"All big pits," nodded Rainbow, "an' in line. Hernandez says that in the middle one, about ten or twelve feet down, there is a door hid in the timberin' o' the north side! An' he says this door opens into a underground room! This room, er whatever it is, was dug an' fixed up fust fer one o' these underground storage cellars that work so slick in this country, an' accordin' to Hernandez, Wolf fixed it up later fer his own pertic'lar use. The well pit makes some ventilation, an' with the door shut it's jes' about the hardest place to find, an' the safest to hide in what is. They's a tree growin' on the ground on top of it, an' Wolf had it timbered up nice an' furnished comfort-

able. I guess mebbe more'n one o' these young Mexican gals an' squaws what has disappeared around here from time to time has found out what that room's like inside. I guess that's where he was figgerin' to take Marjorie! Anyway that's where he's been hidin'! That's where he was hidin' when we searched the ranch, restin' comfo'table, an' laffin' at us! But this time I'm goin' to call on him right thar—me an' Jim an' Lem an' Sim! I done some ridin' since midnight, an' they're waitin' fer me somewheres up that way. I got my orders at last, an' they is to git Wolf Vogel, dead er alive!"

"Lend me a gun, and I'll go with you," urged Jerry, his voice eager, his eyes level and cold.

"No," decided Rainbow, they's a brace o' gals up yonder as has been waitin' quite a spell fer you! Jes' run along an' see 'em, an' don't fergit to thank God fer 'em!" he added softly. "But they is jest one thing—I been a-ridin' Cal on this trail—an' I—I'd sort o' like to have him finish the job with me! I kind o' think he'd like to! I got another hawse ready, if—"

"Take Cal, I'll ride the other," Jerry agreed instantly. "You can bet he wants to finish the job!"

After Rainbow rode away, Jerry tied his pack and blankets behind the saddle on the other horse. Before he had finished Major West came hurrying

to the station to welcome him home, followed by Mrs. West and other old friends. But at last he loped out of the straggling town, his eyes wandering over the sun-flooded slopes of the valley, and a wonderful content stealing into his heart, in spite of its excited beating in anticipation of what awaited him in Mirage Meadows.

Rainbow Ben and his posse closed in upon the Circle Dagger with the deadly earnestness of their kind, and while Sim Watson guarded the mouth of the middle well's pit, the others systematically searched every building on the place. Rainbow Ben had no intention of going down into that pit, and leaving Wolf Vogel outside if he could help it.

In the house they found the comely brown girl, and she led them through the rooms with a willingness which aroused old Rainbow's suspicions. He was soon certain that Vogel was not in the house, and led the girl, protesting, to the mouth of the well. But once there she looked from one to another of the grim men, and instantly changed her tactics, voluably explaining in Spanish that she had misunderstood, that she would be glad to show them the cave-room which was so cool and comfortable in the heat of summer, and where one could take a *siesta* undisturbed.

Flashing down the ladder before they could stop her, she paused a dozen feet down and smil-

ingly teased the men following her to find the door. The timbering appeared exactly the same everywhere. With her slim fingertips she grasped the head of a spike, and drew it half way out—and then reached lower down and withdrew another which had appeared to be firmly driven home—and yielding to the pressure of her hand a section of the timbering of the well swung back, a doorway opening into utter darkness.

She entered swiftly, and a moment later struck a match and soon the yellow glow of candles illumined a room of fair proportions into which the men entered guardedly, with one stationed in the doorway. The floor was of wood, the ceilings and walls of heavy timber. Two couches or bunks were built against the walls, and covered like the floor with heavy rugs of Indian weave. A table held a few books and papers, a tray with matches, two candlesticks, and there was a box of candles under the table. A heavy rocking chair stood beside the table, and two other chairs completed the furnishing of the den.

The men sounded floor, ceiling, walls. All were solid. The girl pulled the blankets off the bunks, showing that there was no hiding place under them, and led the men here and there, calling attention to this article or that object, asking if it were not pretty, or ugly, and gradually becoming so coquettish that Rainbow began

to try to chew his beard, uneasy, suspicious.

"So this is where Wolf keeps his women!" he said, watching the eyes of the brown girl. "Once he got 'em here only God could help 'em! Wonder what his wife in Los Angeles would think—"

"His wife! That is a lie!" the brown girl spat out the words in Spanish. "When he comes back I will be his—" she stopped, realizing she had fallen into a trap, and defied him sullenly.

"I thought so!" observed Rainbow grimly. "Some o' you greasers are tickled to death to be kidnapped!" he added, and then was silent for a few moments. "Well," he began again, "we got plumb into the wolf's den, but the wolf got out fust! It's my guess, howsomever, that we mighty near caught him, that he ain't been gone long, an' this she-varmint is tryin' to keep us here as long as she kin with her carryin's on!" and his words struck fire in the narrowing black eyes of the girl. "Somethin' is worryin' me a heap," Rainbow went on, "worryin' me more every minnit! You boys keep her here, guard everythin', while I do some ridin'! I got to make plumb sartin o' somethin'!"

XXI

A SONG LONG DELAYED

FOR a flashing instant of numb eternity, Marjorie watched Lenore struggle in the torturing grip of the hands of hate. Her lips moved, begging for mercy for Lenore, offering to be the price of that mercy, but as she looked into the gloating eyes in the horrible, passion contorted face of Vogel she knew there would be no mercy, no matter what price was paid.

The numbness flashed from her, and blazing with primal fury she leaped upon him, tearing at the hands gripping Lenore's throat, striking his face—and he dropped Lenore and turned upon her with a bellow of fury. Lenore fell to the floor, gasping, scarcely living, while Marjorie desperately fought the overpowering force which slowly drove her back, pinioned her arms, held her helpless, panting.

"Things are going your way, aren't they!" he sneered, his face close to hers. "Yes, you're having your way! I'm forced to leave! driven out! But before I go I'll have my way with *you!*" he threatened, his unreasoning rage and hate blinding him to everything except his lust

for vengeance—vengeance upon the innocent. "You've been trying to drive me out," he charged, and then taunted: "Don't you want me to hurry? I told you once to pick your friends more carefully. Well, where's your friend? The pauper you chose? He couldn't help you then, and he can't now!" he gloated, while she drew back as far as she could, defiant, mute, hopeless. "When that cur in uniform comes back he'll not find you or—" he started on gloatingly, but Marjorie suddenly wrenched an arm free and stopped his mouth with a terrific blow.

Surprised by the suddenness of her renewed attack, he reached blindly for her arm, and she struck again, and yet again as she wrenched the other arm free and dodged to one side. With all his brute strength he struck at her, cursing horribly, but some intuition guided Marjorie, and she evaded the blow. His swing carried him close to her, and her small fists pounded his face, her hands tore at his ears, eyes, hair.

Back and forth and around the room they struggled. Three times he nearly mastered her with the brute strength of his huge arms and hands, but her months and years working in the open had trained and hardened the muscles beneath Marjorie's fair, soft skin. Her round arms were strong from honest labor, and time after time she broke his hold. Gasping for breath,

running as if borne on wings of light, while his rider leaned forward, his wisp of beard blowing, his mouth grim, his face set, his keen old eyes reaching far ahead.

Changing his tactics again, rushing, clinching, Vogel fought his way toward the door, the gun on the ground outside, his goal. Blocking his advance, seizing every opening to strike, Jerry fought desperately to stop this maneuver.

"Get the gun!" he called hoarsely to Marjorie, but before she could reach the door Vogel swept Jerry back, and the men, fighting like beasts of the jungle, blocked the way. With a supreme effort Jerry broke Vogel's hold upon his throat, and sunk his own fingers deep into Wolf's neck, holding him an instant. Frantic, anxious to help, Marjorie picked up part of a wrecked chair and struck at Vogel's head with all her strength—but he lifted his arm as he fought to break Jerry's hold, the blow glanced on his elbow and struck Jerry over the eyes. He staggered groggily, Wolf broke away and plunged through the door.

Unsteady, panting, Vogel ran toward the gun, stooped, reached a shaking hand for it—and turned to face a figure in khaki, staggering, but unconquerable, charging. Realizing that he had to kill with the first shot, Vogel aimed carefully—and a roar rent the sunlit silence of the morning, a booming chorus. The giant crumpled to

ground so suddenly that the charging soldier stumbled over his body and fell, and when he half raised himself, looking back, dazed, bewildered, it was to see a little old man, half crouching, a smoking six-gun in each hand, a big horse at his back. Sarah and Betsy had sung their song.

XXII

THE SPIRIT OF THE DESERT STARS

THE silence filled the morning like a blessing. A soft breeze came on soundless wings to cleanse the little house and the grove of Joshuas about it with the clean, pure air of God's sublime spaces.

Jerry slowly got to his feet. Still a little dazed, he looked at the crumpled giant on the ground, and then into the eternal blue of the limitless skies. A moment he looked, his bewilderment slipped away from him, and he hurried into the house while Rainbow Ben grimly eyed the thing on the ground.

The room was in wild disorder, littered with broken furniture. Lenore lay in a corner in Marjorie's arms. Her eyes were open, and she was conscious. Marjorie's hair hung about her bare shoulders, her face and neck were bruised, her blouse gone save a few shreds. Jerry paused an instant in the door, then with a choking cry he ran to them, falling upon his knees and gathering them both into his arms.

For a long time the three clung to each other, tearless, mute, their hearts so full there was no

room for words. Then Marjorie whispered that they must care for Lenore, and rose to lead the way while Jerry picked up Lenore in his arms, and followed into the bedroom. She lay against his heart, scarcely breathing, but her eyes wonderful with unutterable joy, their glance sacred. When he had tenderly placed her on the bed he kissed her reverently, and then went into the other room, leaving Marjorie to make her as comfortable as she could. At the front door Rainbow was waiting.

"Marjorie is all right—she fought as only a woman like her can!" Jerry said, his voice hoarse, level. "But Lenore was choked—I—I only know we must fight to save her!"

"I whist I'd—I whist I'd killed him that other time, an' let 'em hang me!" moaned Rainbow, a strange solemnity in his voice. "I figger he was fixin' to try to git to Mexico—but he hated 'em so he couldn't go without—"

"We must telegraph to Cajon for a doctor," Jerry interrupted as if he had not heard.

"I'll 'tend to that," promised Rainbow, "an' I'll git somebody to take *it* away," he motioned with his other hand toward the man on the ground. "Here's one o' my guns," he went on, handing a weapon to Jerry, "you stay here with the gals."

Jerry was studying the littered room when the

door opened, and Marjorie came to meet him, her lips mute, but her soul in her eyes.

"Lenore is waiting," she whispered, and with trembling hands she began automatically to straighten up the room.

Kneeling beside the bed, Jerry drew frail, flower-like Lenore close to his heart, and whispered choking words, sacred words. Her hands crept up to caress his bruised face, and looking into her eyes he knew that he was within the holy of holies.

"Keep me, Jerry!" she whispered, a breath against his ear. "Keep me! I've waited so long for today!"

A great sob choked him, and he held her with yearning tenderness while he comforted her. She smiled weakly, for his heart, strength, and will were sustaining her, driving back the dread shadows.

When Marjorie came back into the room Lenore called her with her eyes, reached a hand to her, and Marjorie took her place beside Jerry, and the hearts of the three comrades were again united, the hearts of the strong sustaining the fluttering life of the third.

After awhile the rumble of wheels and the sound of men's voices came to them. Then silence, and they were alone together until the sound of hurrying hoofs and wheels came again,

and a timid knock summoned Marjorie to the door.

"Lem brought me as quickly as he could," Mary Harkness said simply, taking Marjorie in her arms. As she looked into Mary's eyes the reaction from it all swept over Marjorie, and she hid her face on Mary's breast, sobbing like a little girl in her mother's arms. At last she grew quieter, and looked up into Mary's sweet, care-worn face, and tried to speak, but Mary silenced her with her cheek against Marjorie's lips. Still clinging to Mary, Marjorie looked out of the door to see old Rainbow nervously twisting his hat while he waited in the yard beside Cal, and she called to him softly.

"Is she—is she makin' the grade?" he asked anxiously.

"She's better—Jerry is with her," Marjorie told him.

"I telegraphed to the railroad boys in Cajon to ship us a doctor," he said, "an' they wired right back that they'd be one on Number Nine this evenin'. I come back to tell you I'd bring him out."

All day the women came, bringing the love in their hearts and their willing hands. While the front room was made as neat and homelike as possible, Jerry kept his watch beside the bed. Lenore slept, or watched him dreamily.

It was dark when Rainbow drove up with the doctor. Removing his overcoat, the gray eyed, gray haired doctor asked Marjorie a few questions, and then went into the sick room. Gently, sympathetically, cheerfully, he made his examination, chatted about pleasant things, his eyes traveling from the white face on the pillow to the bronzed one of the soldier beside the bed, and then he went back into the other room, leaving an air of hope and cheer behind him.

In the front room, the door closed, Marjorie faced him, a question in her eyes.

"I can do nothing," he answered.

"But—but we must—you don't mean—" she choked, her eyes wide, shadowed.

"I do not mean that there is no hope," he told her quickly. "It is simply a case where I am powerless. But that—that boy in there will keep her—if it is to be! Only the plans of Providence can defeat those boys. I know, I was over there with them. If it is God's plan, he will keep her in spite of everything else," he added softly. "But I'll stay tonight, to be here to fight for her with him and with you, in case anything develops where I can help."

For a long time silence filled the little room, while the doctor paced noiselessly up and down. Then, her face tragic, Marjorie spoke again.

"Did I—do wrong in bringing Lenore here?" she choked. "We thought it would help her, and oh! we had such dreams—plans! They may have blinded us—me—was it wrong for me to permit her to stay when—"

"Not for an instant, child!" he interrupted. "That old man who brought me out here told me many things, and these facts, together with what I have learned since I arrived, convince me that you were absolutely right. The clean air and life here in the open should have helped her, and with your love and strength to sustain her, she had a thousand chances where she had one before. Undoubtedly it did help her. I have seen many men attempt to conquer the desert, and I know she surrenders only to the strong. But she does help the weak, when the weak have others upon whom to lean for added strength. You surrounded your sister with all your love and strength, but hardships crowded close, persecution, the war, this—" he indicated the day's tragedy with expressive hands. "You were not to blame for them. I don't know what the outcome will be; but you can always know, without question or reservation, that you did right!"

All through the night Jerry watched beside Lenore, his heart and will fighting for her, grimly, tenderly. And as the hours wore on her sleep

became more quiet, her breathing less strained and more regular. The sun was an hour high when she opened her eyes. For a moment she looked at Jerry, almost unbelieving, and then a light of pure joy flooded her eyes while she reached her hands to touch his face—and in a little while he called Marjorie, and went out. Rainbow came to take the doctor back to the railroad. When the physician had again examined Lenore, he reiterated his statement that he could do nothing for her, that it all depended upon the three, and the plans of their Master, and drove away.

The days of care and watching grew into a week. Friends, tried and close, came to help. Nettie Burton drove long miles to prepare meals for Marjorie and Jerry, and Mary Harkness and Jane Watson and Mrs. West came to relieve Marjorie's hands of the humble tasks of the home. Jerry slept part of each day, Marjorie part of each night, but one or the other was always with Lenore. And Lenore watched them, fragile as a flower, unable to speak above a whisper, smiling in spite of pain, and whispering as they bent over her that she was happy, so happy!

On Sunday morning Marjorie propped her up in bed, plaited the spun gold of her hair into two long braids, and dressed her with the dainty things she had. Rainbow had come to make his

usual inquiries, and when Marjorie called Jerry she urged old Rainbow to come in too. The men sat down on either side of the bed, while Marjorie stood at the foot, watching them all. Rainbow took the hand Lenore reached him, held it a little bashfully for a moment, then released it. Lenore's eyes smiled up at him, then wandered back to Jerry's face, and lingered. Rainbow's shrewd old eyes studied the worn, drawn faces of Marjorie and Jerry, and he fingered his hat in his talon-like old hands, and then erupted.

"Wimmin is funny critters," he said softly. "Here I come out here to give Miss Lenore a chance to rest her eyes by lookin' at a good lookin' man, an' she spends all her time lookin' at that homely horned toad of a Jerry!" he finished, and Lenore turned to him, smiling brightly, and Marjorie laughed, while Jeryy studied his old friend, smiling a little.

The days dragged on, and Lenore grew brighter, happy and content in the presence of Marjorie and Jerry. Nearly every evening, his work finished, Rainbow Ben stopped in, his chuckling accounts of the happenings of the day driving gloom far away from the little home.

"There was a feller askin' fer you today in Mirage, Jerry," he announced one evening. "He got offen the train, an' come over to my barn with his wife. He's a leetle, sawed off feller,

but strong an' freckled, an' his wife is one o' these sort o' pale, hungry lookin' gals that ain't never had their share o' sunshine. She's sort o' cute, with her hair frizzed over her ears like the pitchers in the magazines, makin' her look sort o' like a sick sheep.

"He comes up to where I'm standin', an' sez: 'Is this where Jerry Miller lives?' An' when I tole him you lived in the valley, an' asks him is there anythin' I kin do fer him, he sez: 'I know, you're Rainbow Ben. My name's Walker, Tim Walker, an' this is my wife, Nellie. I was in the tank corps, an' I met Jerry one night where his outfit was fixin' a bridge, an' we got acquainted, bein' as we was takin' a shower bath together with all the water runnin' out o' the sky, but not enough to wash the mud off us at that! He told me about this place that night, an' I got to thinkin'. Nellie an' I got married jest before I went across,' he explains on, 'an' Nellie was workin' at her ole job in the basement of a department store. The more I thought about the sunshine an' room Jerry talked about, the surer I was that that was the place fer Nellie an' me. Havin' a home of our own, an' all that room an' sunshine free, looked like a dream, an' I was afraid I'd wake up. But when I got back, my captain found out fer me where Captain Stanley was workin', an' I wrote him, tellin' him how

much money Nellie an' I had in the savin's bank, an' that if he had some sort o' work that could be mixed with our savin's an' fixed with a home on the end of it, all we wanted to know was our new address! He answers me that he needs men with my experience to drive tractors, an' so Nellie an' me, we're here!' "

"I remember Tim," mused Jerry. "That night was a regular one! The air was water, and the ground was mud! There wasn't anything else! Did Stanley take him on?"

"O' course," Rainbow answered. "I took 'em up to camp, an' the chief, he was near as tickled as them youngsters was! He likes 'em in pairs! He's got some cats comin', some o' them ballyhootin' crawler tractors about as big as box cars, the kind that meander along like iron centypeeds, an' he wants a soldier skinnin' every one!"

The work went ahead steadily at the dam, the camp grew until it was far larger than it had been during the earlier construction, material rolled in, discharged soldiers came seeking work and homes, sometimes with brides, occasionally with a wife and one or two children. Piles of lumber flanked Major West's store, auto trucks chugged up and down the valley, tin lizards rattled over the winding roads, and new homes—only shacks to the casual eye, but homes just the

same—marked the long slopes in all directions, and Mirage began to put on airs with the miracle wrought by the hurrying days.

Amid her pillows, Lenore watched Jerry or Marjorie, whispering her thoughts, a wonderful joy in her eyes. Mary Harkness came down to visit her one afternoon, and stayed on into the evening, Marjorie persuading her to remain to supper, and promising Lem that Jerry would take her home. Lenore had been sleeping quietly while Jerry sat beside her bed. The other two had washed the supper dishes, and were resting, talking, when Jerry called Marjorie. In the little bedroom she found Lenore awake, and Jerry upon his knees beside the bed, his arms about her, while Lenore whispered to him, a glad light illumining the pale beauty of her face. Instantly Marjorie joined Jerry beside the bed, her heart stilled by something she could not name—but when Lenore saw her she smiled.

"All my dreams have come true!" Lenore whispered to them both. "You have made them all come true!" and she was silent again, while the others whispered to her of their love. "I waited so—so long for you, Jerry!" Lenore began again. "Sometimes I did not think I could wait until you came—but Marjorie—kept me—and I dreamed about it—about your coming—and—and always I dreamed that you came—and

then—and then everything was just a heaven of happiness! A heaven of joy! My pain would go away—only happiness would be left! It has all come true—just as I dreamed! You—you and Marjorie have kept me—made it all true—my pain—is—gone—let me go—Jerry—your love made—it is just as I dreamed—a heaven of happiness—" the whisper stopped, and while they looked upon the pure beauty of the still face on the pillow, it seemed to the two watching alone that a light of heavenly joy illumined it.

When Jerry led Marjorie from the room he nodded to Mary Harkness. She understood, and went in, her worn, loving hands ready to do the sacred task which had fallen to them.

The night had sown the sky with stars until the heavens blazed with a holy light, and Jerry led Marjorie outside.

"It can't be—she can't be gone!" Marjorie said, dry eyed, tense.

"No, she has not left us—she has just been released from pain and trouble and sorrow—has just passed on to eternal happiness!" he answered chokingly.

"Ramon used to call her 'the spirit of the desert stars,'" Marjorie said huskily after a moment, looking up into the glory of the heavens.

"That is what she is—the spirit of the desert stars—and she will be with us always!" Jerry

comforted, and Marjorie hid her face against him, sobbing, while the blazing stars leaned close.

XXIII

THE TRENCHES OF LIFE

COMRADES in the shadows darkening the bright days, Marjorie and Jerry took up their altered lives. Her spirit stunned for the time, Marjorie sometimes watched for hours while Jerry worked in her fields, and at others she labored feverishly beside him, following his lead in everything, unquestioningly accepting his help and his decisions. He arranged a half partitioned room for himself in one corner of the barn, and while Marjorie cared for her house, her chickens and turkeys, toiled beside him, or dreamed in the shade, he worked from sun to sun planting her fields, for her cleared land had to be in crops if she was to successfully make final proof upon her homestead in the Land Office. His own land could lie idle without affecting his proof, for he had had more than the required number of acres in crop the year the hordes of hunger came, had lived more than one year on his homestead, and had finished the required residence period as a soldier.

Throughout the long days both looked forward to the evenings, for in the afterglow following

the sunset, sitting together in the warm breeze, their eyes wandering over the far peeks of the castle mountains, they talked of Lenore, turning the pages of the book of golden memories she had left them. At last half the land was sowed to rye, and two thirds of the remainder planted to kaffir, the rest being divided between mangels, melons, and vegetables of various sorts.

"Jim Burton stopped by today when I was down at the other end of the field," Jerry told Marjorie, the evening the planting was finished, "and he is going to work for Captain Stanley on the dam."

"What about Nettie, and Little Jim?" she asked. "He lives too far down the valley to go back and forth every day. He did it before, but I have often heard him say he would never attempt it again. Nettie can't stay there alone."

"Jim and I talked about that," he answered, hesitated, and then resumed: "You can't stay here alone either, Marjorie," he said earnestly. "The valley is filling up with strangers. Things are changing. People don't understand, and we can't go on this way. It isn't right to you!" he lifted his hand to forestall her protest. "Wouldn't you like to have Nettie and Little Jim come and live here for awhile with you? You girls are mighty good friends, and little Jim is—"

"I love her," Marjorie interrupted, "and Little

Jim is a darling! I—I don't exactly want anyone to come to live with me, Jerry, but if you believe it best, I think I would rather have Nettie than anyone else, because of Little Jim! But you aren't going to—"

"Captain Stanley is waiting for me, and I have to go to work, but I'd like to keep my suit in the barn if neither you nor the horses object," he interrupted with an attempt at lightness.

In the days which followed the coming of Nettie and Little Jim to Mirage Meadows a change gradually came over Marjorie. It was Little Jim, scarcely four years old, curlyheaded, chubby and freckled, tagging after her during his waking hours, who soothed the pain in her heart.

Watching Marjorie while she romped with Little Jim before the tiny boy went to bed, Jerry saw her old spirit emerging, conquering. But when she was alone with him a sweet reserve enfolded her, invisible, and yet he felt it, and became more restrained, more quiet.

Captain Stanley with an assistant project director and a soil expert and adviser had located the homeseeking soldiers and other settlers as fast as they came, upon plots of twenty, forty, sixty or more acres, according to their abilities to meet the payments for the water right when they should come due, and the nature of the farming they wanted to follow. Trucks and teams hauled lum-

ber and household goods here and there, and every day the sun noted at least one new shack on the sweeping slopes of the northern side of the valley.

An enormous crawler tractor arrived one day, occupying a whole car. It was of the sort known on the desert as a cat, but this was a big cat. Rainbow Ben and little Tim Walters examined the ninety horsepower fifteen-ton monster curiously.

"She's my baby!" Tim announced gleefully. "Some cat, huh! An' from what the chief says she's goin' to have a brother er sister right away!"

And the "brother er sister" came, and the two ambled like ponderous reptiles over the valley, each hauling a full car load in its train of clanking trail wagons as they freighted material from Mirage to the site of the dam. Auto trucks were unloaded from the growing strings of cars shunted onto the Mirage switch, and these also ground and rumbled their way up and down the valley, busily performing the service assigned to them. Other cars discharged mules, scrapers, and all manner of grading equipment, while Captain Stanley verified the survey for the main canal which would hug the low hills to the north and serve the higher levels.

To the mule corrals, just below the mouth of the canyon and surrounded by parked equipment, the soldiers turning to the land reported on the

day set. The construction bosses assigned teams, places, and duties. With eight mules hooked to a single road plow, and Rainbow coaching the soldier handling the long team, and three soldiers on the plow, the men who had fought so well in the trenches of death turned the first earth in this great trench of life, while their whoops startled the echoes with youth's challenge to the gray, age-old desert. Other plows followed the first, and behind the plows came the scrapers, picking up the loosened earth and later spreading it on the lower side of the line of stakes marking the canal. The plows dug deeper, the scrapers removed the next layer of earth, and every hour and every day the trench grew to its destined width and depth, and stretched out along its sinuous course.

Jerry was puzzled by the work assigned to him, for without title or designation of any sort, he found himself Captain Stanley's assistant, his representative. Not as an engineer, of course, or even as a boss of any particular line of work. He drew the same pay the other former soldiers drew, was empowered with no authority, but the overworked chief could not be everywhere, and Jerry went here and there with his instructions, aided in this job or that when an extra hand was needed, and carried the reports of progress to Stanley.

While the work on the canal went ahead

steadily the men digging the big trench eagerly awaited news from Washington. The newspapers held out little hope for the proposed Soldiers' Compensation Act. They had come, as any citizen could come, to invest their money and hearts and labor in the lands of the valley, and had found work on the project. Work which made it possible for them to attempt to attain their ideal, a home on the land. But once before their lives had been ordered and arranged for them by Congress—and now the action Congress might take again, vitally affected their lives. They had offered all, had given much to their country—would there be any reward? And when they knew that their service, and the service of all their comrades had been lost sight of entirely in a bitter factional fight, they were bitter. The day's work finished, Jerry and Rainbow found the former soldiers gathered at the base of the hill above the corrals.

"What are we going to do?" demanded an ex-sergeant, belligerent in his disappointment.

"I'm going to keep right on working," Jerry answered quietly.

"Yes, but you've got your land and—"

"I have my land because I settled on it and improved it before the war started," Jerry interrupted, "and because the law credits my time in service on the required residence, just as it credits

the time you served. We all take up our land under the Homestead Law. I was here first, that is the only difference in our cases. And I will have to pay the assessments for the water for every acre of my land just as you will for yours. I don't know how I'm going to do it, but ranching is no job for a quitter, and this is just the first skirmish!"

"Them rep-tiles in Congress was talkin' as politicians an' not as Americans when they cheated you youngsters out o' a leetle help!" Rainbow erupted. "If yer a pack o' yeller hounds ye'll stick yer tails 'tween yer laigs an' whine! I don't know nothin' 'bout which is the best scheme fer givin' you a boost, but I know that if yer what I think ye are, ye'll stick to yer jobs, an' putty soon the American people will have somethin' interestin' to say!"

"Rainbow is right," Jerry affirmed quietly. "None of us expected to have farms and equipment given to us. We just want a chance, and the American people are the best bet I know of. I have been hoping, and sort of banking on the Government backing us, giving us a chance, just as you have, and this hits me just as hard as it hits you. If the Government turns us down finally, why! we'll just have to back ourselves! Work out our own salvation!"

"Well, how are we going about it?" persisted

the ex-sergeant, and Jerry answered kindly, because he knew the man had a wife, longed for a home, and was worried and disappointed.

"Why, we'll just work it out here under the rules and provisions adopted for this project," he argued. "This wasn't started for soldiers. It's not strictly for soldiers now. Any citizen can come here and take up land. But Captain Stanley is helping us. We get our land for developing it and living on it. It's a slow way, but it's the way I'll have to take. I'm going to try it until a better way shows up."

"One thing I notice," observed Tim Walters, "not a man who acted as nursemaid to a tank in that French speakin' mud is kickin'! The sunshine an' the dryness is too good for us to kick at anything! If the Government don't back us, why, me an' my wife are goin' to back ourselves, just like Jerry says! I got a forty salted down alongside of his place!"

While Rainbow watched, an unreadable smile in his eyes, the men gathered around Jerry, eagerly discussing all phases of their problem, invisibly shifting a portion of the burden of their anxiety to his shoulders. And while Rainbow rode homeward happy, singing an outlandish song of the wild old days, Jerry rode to Mirage Meadows with the weight of invisible, intangible,

but real responsibilities upon his mind. Marjorie joined him as he unsaddled.

"I had a letter from Ramon today!" she called, "and he is back, and hopes to be home before long!"

"It will be mighty good to see him!" enthused Jerry, watching her closely, and together they went in to the supper Nettie had ready.

Another light rain came at last, and while Marjorie and all the others who had growing crops on their land spent every available moment cultivating to conserve the precious moisture, work began on the dam itself. Confident that there would be no floods, and with material on hand and prepared, Captain Stanley and his assistants, with the crew of Mexican laborers, began setting in place the forms of heavy timber which were to serve as a mold for the dam, and started to fabricate the maze of twisted steel which was to reinforce the concrete.

Even though he was somewhat shorthanded at the dam, Captain Stanley started another crew to digging the main canal as soon as he had men enough to fill the needed quota. The former soldiers did not like to work with the Mexicans, and did like to work by themselves—and their labor was needed on the canal. The second crew started where the canal would end for the project's first unit, just where it curved through the

highest corner of Jerry's homestead, and worked back toward the dam. The first crew, already well upon its way, worked on toward the second.

While they dug the trenches of life deep and broad, and longer and ever longer, the construction of the dam went ahead slowly. There might be thousands of men out of work elsewhere, but there were none in Mirage. Struggling to keep both divisions of the project going, Captain Stanley had to employ whatever the desert offered —Mexicans, tramps, wanderers.

Jerry lost track of all scheduled hours of work, for there was trouble at the dam, the threat of strife in the camp. In addition, Captain Stanley asked continually how this man or that man was getting along, if he planned to fight it out on his allotted piece of land, or to get out. He asked what worried the boys the most, and endless other questions, kindly meant. So Jerry rode through the bright evenings, calling on the men in their little homes, talking with them and with their wives, learning their problems, helping them to a better understanding of clouded points—and to every man and woman and child to whom the valley was home he became "Jerry"—their friend. Quiet, unassuming, he moved among the people. Children and dogs ran to him. Men and women looked for his glance and smile of recognition

when he entered a group. And old Rainbow Ben exulted and Captain Stanley smiled his odd smile, for they were the conspirators of the board of strategy.

"These boys are tired of constituted authority, mighty tired of it!" the wise chief engineer explained to Rainbow. "They want to pick their own leader, and they will pick him in spite of everyone and everything else! The great thing is to furnish the right leader for them to pick. They will follow that boy because he has a vision —a vision he never loses sight of!"

The two trenches of life which, when linked together would form the main canal grew rapidly, but the work on the dam itself did not progress satisfactorily. The men found no fault openly with their wages, hours, or working conditions, but trouble seemed always lurking just beneath the surface. As time wore on Captain Stanley became convinced that the threatened trouble had nothing to do with wages or anything connected with the work itself, but instead was a manifestation of a mysterious unrest.

Seeking to combat this unseen force, and if possible to make it visible and drag it into the light of day, so that all might understand each other better, the engineer asked Jerry to spend more time among the men of the camp, to go among them in the evening. So Jerry's days grew

even longer, and it was usually late before he reached home.

While still some distance from the house, as he was returning from the camp one evening, he saw Marjorie talking with someone in the glowing light of the lamp shining through the open door. A moment later he recognized Ramon, and saw that he was standing beside his horse, evidently just leaving. Without thought of intruding or spying, Jerry was on the point of calling a glad greeting, when Marjorie suddenly stepped close to Ramon, placed her hands upon his shoulders, and lifted her face to his—and Jerry turned away, swung Cal around and slowed him to a walk, and rode slowly through the night, alone with the desert stars.

XXIV

THE SEED OF UNREST

LIKE sacred candles borne by spirits worshipping before the Throne of God, the stars wheeled to the destined march of worlds, flaming above a lone rider, his tired horse standing on a pinnacle of a lava hill. Man and horse drooped with the weariness of a long day of toil, and many, many hours of wandering in the night. "I'm not jealous, Cal, no, not that," Jerry said to the pinto. "I might have seen it coming. Ramon is my friend, comrade, he is as worthy as any man—and Marjorie has been true and square. I remember how she used to ride with him. She always sent me to Lenore. Yes, I might have known. And I am not jealous, not bitter—it is just that—losing both—Marjorie and Lenore almost at once—I wasn't ready for it, Cal, never would be ready, and something has sort of broken—"

For long he sat, his head sunk forward upon his chest. But at last he lifted his face to the stars, his heart crying out to them for comfort, and the spirit of the desert stars enfolded him. When the last star faded he turned his face to the

new day, strengthened, comforted, and from the pinnacle of the lava hill where he had overlooked the valley with the old chief, that day so long ago when he had laughed his challenge to life and to the desert, he rode into the sunrise.

When he reached the camp he unsaddled, turned Cal into the corral, saw to it that he had feed and water, went to breakfast in the mess tent, and reported for work. John Stanley studied him, wondering, for Jerry was haggard, graver than usual, but alert, ready, even eager for the day's work to begin—and his chief sent him to work that day with the motley crew on the dam.

Weary as he was with his thoughts, his night of wandering and two days of labor, too utterly tired to think of going to the camp for the evening, Jerry lingered to discuss the problem of the trouble in the crew with his chief, for he dreaded the return to Mirage Meadows. He wondered how she would act, what he should say, what Marjorie would say. But at last he rode homeward, and when he stopped beside the barn Marjorie came running.

"Oh, Jerry! Ramon is home!" she called. "I am so sorry you had to stay away last night, for he was here! He came in the afternoon, and I persuaded him to stay to supper so you could see him, and then he waited as long as he could. But you didn't—" she hesitated, catching sight of

his haggard face as she came closer, "you didn't come!"

"I'm mighty sorry. It would have been good to see Ramon!" he answered, the ring of true friendship and regret in his voice. "He hasn't changed any, has he? I'll bet he's the same old Ramon!"

"Just the same," she told him, "except that he is even more quiet, and he has more dreams than ever for his—his people. He knew about Lenore, and he said such—beautiful things—but—you're too worn out to talk now, Jerry," she decided, watching his face. "You look like a ghost! Come in to supper. Perhaps it will make you feel better. Is the trouble at the dam so serious that you have to watch and work night and day?" she asked anxiously, taking his arm as they walked toward the house.

"I've run into trouble of several kinds," he told her cryptically, "but it will come out right. I'm dead on my feet tonight, but let's try to forget trouble. What did Ramon say about his father and the old chief? I've been wanting to ride over and see them, but haven't had time," and while they sat about the table with Nettie and Little Jim she told him brightly all the news of Ramon and his people, but nothing whatever about herself and Ramon. Neither did she mention it when he purposely gave her the opening

as they sat together in the warm twilight while he finished his cigarette. Jerry went to his room in the barn early, his feelings hurt, unreasonably he admitted to himself, but that did not cure the hurt.

With the valley about it humming with industry, Mirage preened itself in the sun. Strings of cars were unloaded every day on the switch now grown to three times its original length. The huge auto trucks took up their share of the load and ground their rumbling way about the valley or to the dam. The two gigantic cats rolled ponderously into town with trains of empty trailers, and then clawed their way back up the valley to the rhythmic march of their roaring cylinders, climbing the steep, winding roads up the lava hill and delivering their mighty freights on the very top, just back of the concrete mixers.

Major West's store again expanded, and the wheels of wagons, buckboards, and automobiles scattered the dust of the main street as the busy people came and went about their affairs.

But while the steadily growing population of the valley broke the spell of the silence with laughter and songs, and forgot the hovering loneliness in companionship, work, and entertainment, trouble showed its ugly face furtively at the dam. The crew was steadily growing larger, and the work went on in spite of a threat lurking

just beyond the reach of John Stanley and his assistants—a threat leering at them from tomorrow. Well paid, happy and contented if left alone, the Mexicans were not being left alone—the seed of unrest was being sown broadcast among them, and was taking root in their ignorance.

"It's the I. W. W.!" said Tim Walters when Jerry took his worries to the little boss of the cat skinners one evening. "Some of 'em are stirrin' up trouble among the Mexicans!"

"You're undoubtedly right," agreed Jerry, "but we're desperate for men up there. I'm suspicious of two in particular. One calls himself Wobbly Wally. He's sort of chubby, blue eyes, big mouth, and a mighty smooth talker in Spanish. The men call the other one Soapy Joe. He's that big bandit on the north mixer, that dark complexioned one whose nose barely separates his eyes, and who is always showing his yellow teeth because of his undershot jaw. But the chief wants to be fair, and—"

"Say, I've been a workin' man ever since I was a workin' boy!" interrupted Tim, "an' he's the fairest man I ever worked for!"

"He tries to stand so straight I sometimes think he leans backwards," agreed Jerry. "But in spite of that, and the wages and hours, and everything, they may strike!"

"They won't strike—they may declare war!" Tim answered grimly.

The day Marjorie and Jerry received notice that their proofs had been passed upon and that the land was their own, was a happy one. Marjorie read her notification in the post office, while her heart throbbed with triumph. Taking the official envelope addressed to Jerry, and containing his notice, she rode home quickly.

That evening Jerry came home to supper, and he noticed that her color was higher, that an excited light glowed in her eyes, and he wondered a little. In the bright sunset lights while he sat outside, she came up behind him, clapped her hands over his eyes, and asked him to guess the news, guess what she had for him. And even though he failed to name the answer, she at last gave him the envelope—but when he looked up from his perusal of the papers the radiant girl watching him made him forget his triumph.

"We've won! We've won!" she cried. "Even though we knew we had fulfilled the law, isn't it wonderful to *know* that we've won!"

"It is," he agreed, "and the first skirmish is over. We've really got something. The day the water goes on this land it will be worth one hundred dollars an acre! And as soon as it's in alfalfa and—"

"It isn't the value of the land in money," she

interrupted, "it is—a home—and the promise of enough—even more than enough! The water means life—success! Oh! I have never felt so—so rich! I have—half a home and—"

"What do you mean, 'half a home'?" he broke in.

"Oh, that—just slipped out—I just meant—something!" she blushed, and hurried on. "I have my well, and that is priceless!" she enthused.

"I am just as happy over it all as you are," he told her softly, "the trail has been long, Marjorie, we know all about it. But it's winding at last for you—and—it's winding for me, too!" he went on, while she looked at him with bright, wondering eyes. "That canal ends right in the upper corner of my cleared field. Even though the big ditch isn't done, they have already put in a headgate there—for the water I will get when the time comes. I will be the first man to get water! The others will have to wait for the laterals of the distributing system. That just happened, of course, and I didn't think much about it until today.

"But another thing has happened which makes this important. An old codger, farmer turned banker, has been hanging around here for quite a while, talking about establishing a bank in Mirage. He is going ahead with it, and he knows the folks here will have to have hogs and other

stock to feed their crops to, if they are to get hold of money to bank. Today he offered to back me in establishing a foundation herd of hogs on my place! I'll be ready first, and by the time the others get their places started I will have stock to sell to those who want it. My herd will be the foundation stock for the valley. It's sort of—of salvation!"

"Oh, Jerry," she whispered, gripping both his hands, her eyes shining in the dusk. "I know Mr. Malcolm. He has been here several times. He has never mentioned you particularly, but was so interested in my chickens and turkeys. And I've seen him going everywhere, talking to everyone, and—I know that the water part is just an accident—but—this isn't! I'm so—*so* proud."

"Why—" he began, but paused and looked up in answer to a hail. "Ramon!" he called, rising and hurrying with Marjorie to meet the approaching horseman.

Ramon swung from his saddle to be grabbed by Jerry in a bear hug. A moment later the two old friends, comrades of the range and battlefield, were studying each other as they entered the house.

Nettie was putting Little Jim to bed, and while the three found seats the men watched Marjorie, her glowing cheeks and eyes kindling an answering light in their glances.

"I can't wait—can I tell him, Jerry?" she begged.

"It is supposed to be a secret," Jerry answered, "but Ramon is included within the secret circle, of course."

Radiant, excited, Marjorie skipped her own victory in winning title to her land to tell of the plan which meant success for Jerry, and in his quiet, sincere way, Ramon was as enthusiastic as she was. Their faces turned toward the future, they planned together, Marjorie glowing, the men more quiet, until Ramon told them of the passing of the old chief.

"So the old chief has gone to join his fathers, and his children, mused Jerry regretfully. "I had hoped to see him again. He was a great man, Ramon!"

"His heart was great, and he lived for us, his people," Ramon answered. "We will miss him, need him I fear, for I must lead my people now. My work is there, they have no one else!"

When at last Ramon left he led his horse while Jerry walked with him along the trail. For long the friends talked beneath the stars, talked of the people of the Triangle Bar Ranch, of the war, of each other, Marjorie, but again Jerry returned to his room in the barn hurt—hurt because he felt that the two friends closest to him in all the world were excluding him from their confidence.

Holding to the lines of the surveyed level, the two links of the main canal wound serpent-like toward each other. Bending toward the river's wash where the long slope of a hill reached far down into the valley, and winding back into the wide coves and shallow canyons, it stretched itself in the sun.

From below the canal appeared to run uphill, because its fall was not as great as that of the wash in the valley's bottom. Even though he knew better, old Rainbow Ben pretended to believe that it did run uphill, because it gave the boys of his two crews a chance to argue with him, and frequently brought them a day of joking when the wise old mule skinner managed to get a "rise" out of a newcomer. And because he led without commanding, stirred his directions into his arguments, and seasoned the whole with all the known and many unknown reptiles, the two crews digging the canal worked hard and happily, and John Stanley was amazed at their progress.

Tim Walters and Frank Drake kept their huge cats purring contentedly, or roaring defiance to tons as they clawed their way from the railroad to the dam. But the dam was still the problem. The gates were in and the concrete poured to a height of nearly twenty feet, but it should have been thirty. The reinforcing steel was in place

for many more feet, and the wooden forms towered empty above the finished work.

Lem Harkness finished his scant harvest, and at John Stanley's urgent request reported for work, and he was soon followed by Sim Watson, Ed Squires, and half a dozen more of the older settlers of the valley. Because they were older and had a smattering of Spanish, they could work without friction with the Mexicans, and were assigned to the crusher crew on the south side of the dam.

Jerry spent his days down in the dam where the concrete ran from the clanking, jointed pipes, or up with the crusher or mixer crews on the brink of the northern cliff of the canyon above where that end of the dam would join the hill. Ramon rode into the valley whenever he could, and sometimes he came to the dam, but generally Jerry did not see him, and only heard of his visits through Marjorie. Cal wandered about looking for company, since Jerry had no need for him except to ride back and forth. So, when Marjorie's harvest was completed and she no longer needed the team, Jerry drove back and forth from his work, and insisted that Marjorie ride Cal.

A crew of miners, long waited for, came at last. The dynamite and equipment for their work having arrived before them, they immediately began blasting the spillway from the gates in the dam

to the end of the canal. Blown from the living rock of the hill along the base of the canyon's northern cliff, the outlet linking the waters to be stored with the canal which would carry them to the land progressed rapidly.

The winter had been unusually dry even for the desert, the spring but a flash of barbaric colors, and when the hot, dry breath of midsummer grew damp, sticky, old Rainbow Ben began sniffing the air and clawing his beard. A haze hung over the horizons, and crept with the passing days into the valley. A little black cloud led a trailing fleet of three others in an aimless cruise through the heavens. At last they cast their anchors about the summit of the tallest peak of the mountains of the west. Another fleet of clouds followed, and then a lone one sailed heavily up from the south to darken the western heavens—and Rainbow hurried to John Stanley.

"There's cloudbusts ahead!" he declared. "I been here a mighty long time, an' I kin read the signs! An' the signs is plain! Mebbe they'll miss us. But if one good bust comes down any one o' them draws leadin' into the basin above here, that quarter finished dam'll be plumb finished in jes' one minnit!"

"I know. We've got to pour ten feet more on top of what is there before we're safe!" the engineer replied, worried. "I had to take chances on

a good many things, and I thought that a flood was the last thing I had to worry about. I knew, of course, that cloudbursts were a possibility, but a mighty slim one. Without the trouble in the crew we would have had the dam away up and safe. While we're hoping that the cloudbursts will miss us, if there are any, we'll get busier than ever on the dam."

While the weather grew more threatening and unsettled every day, John Stanley and his assistants used every effort to speed up the pouring of the concrete.

The two long trenches which were to become the main canal were so nearly completed that the crews could shout to each other. In friendly rivalry they worked faster and faster, and gradually became one crew.

Riding through the hot, muggy air of an afternoon thickly overcast with a haze which darkened as it stretched westward to hide the mountains behind a black barrier, Marjorie stopped Cal below the dam, and from her saddle watched the men at work high above her on the brink of the northern wall of the canyon. She had recognized Jerry's figure, as he worked with the crew of the great concrete mixer, and was watching him when John Stanley passed, and stopped to speak to her, the eyes of both following the men on the cliff.

A low rumble of thunder echoed hollowly above

XXV

THE DRUMS OF DESTINY

THE wind blowing his wisp of chin-whisker, one hand gripping the lines, the other swinging the whip, his four mules running as if from fire, a little old man careened up the valley, standing erect in a two-wheeled grading scraper. Streaming behind in a pounding roar of hoofs and rumble of wheels thundered a racing column of chariots—two-wheeled scrapers put to deadly use by the men who had just finished the canal —men charging to primal battle for their homes.

A great pinto horse flashed through the desert growths, speeding toward a gray ribbon of road close to the river's wraith where two Titanic, reptile-like monsters crept slowly toward the dam, each followed by a train of mighty wagons heavily laden. The pinto paused beside the leading monster, his rider leaned from her saddle—and a moment later strong hands had loosened the couplings and the two big cats, their cylinders roaring defiance, rolled on unhindered, rolled on toward the hill leading to the southern end of the dam.

While Lem and his men and the construction

bosses on the south side of the canyon forced the mob back with shovels, picks, and crowbars, Jerry faced Wobbly Wally and Soapy Joe and their ugly mob, alone on the brink of the northern cliff. Playing for time, Jerry tried to argue calmly, hoping to sway the Mexicans, urging them to lay their grievances, if they had any, before the chief, telling them they were being duped. Some listened, but the frenzied cries of others drowned Jerry's voice, and the mob-spirit crazed the motley crew.

"We'll get you!" threatened Wobbly Wally. "You and your kind do the dirty work for the money kings! You think you're better than we are! that the world belongs to you! You expect to get the land won by our labor because you murdered for money! You scabs in—"

Leaping straight for the mob Jerry struck with all his strength, putting the lunge of legs and back into the swing of his arm and shoulder, and Wally crashed down, and stayed down. The mob hesitated, advanced, then at a yell from Soapy Joe fell back with a rush. Wondering, Jerry was looking for a weapon when an explosion close at hand stunned him for a moment. An instant later he saw that the engine which drove the concrete mixer had been wrecked, blown up.

As if in answer to a signal, a maniacal yell rose from the mob on the southern side of the canyon.

They rushed Lem and the men with him, forced them back, and soon a second explosion echoed the first, marking the destruction of the other mixer engine.

Lem and the others fought the mob from their end of the dam, the construction bosses and assistant engineers drove them from the rock crusher at the north end, but five score yelling demoniacs suddenly charged Jerry, intent upon throwing him off the cliff. He had to jump for the ladder leading down to the partially completed dam. Climbing swiftly down it, he jumped the last few feet to avoid rocks thrown from above, and fell upon a Mexican madly rushing for the ladder, knocking the man down. An instant later he gripped him.

"You'll stay here with me," he said.

"No! In the name of the Virgin! No!" screamed the man, fighting madly to escape.

"So you've planted one down here, have you!" Jerry accused, his voice level. "You poor dupe! Well, if the dam goes up, you and I go with it!"

An instant the trembling Mexican looked into the other's level eyes, then wrenched himself free and ran back over the soft concrete, dodging between the bars of the reinforcing steel. Following swiftly, Jerry came upon him kneeling over a box, cutting a long fuse with a knife held in a shaking hand. The knife's blade cut through

the fuse, the man looked at the end of the piece cut off, and while he looked a vicious little spurt of fire shot out of it, and the quaking, ashen Mexican held it up to the man standing over him.

A mighty thunder of hoofs and clanging of steel came from the direction of the mouth of the canyon, and a frenzy of destruction gripped the mobs on top of the hill at either side. The boom of an explosion rumbled through the gorge, followed by the sound of rolling rocks and sliding gravel. Seeing the advancing chariots the Mexicans had blown up the road leading to the top of the northern hill.

The mob on the south side of the dam was smaller, and Lem and his men were holding their own with it when two great cats, predecessors of the tanks of war, suddenly rolled over the summit and advanced straight into the mass of struggling men. A scream of both fury and terror rang above the battle, and as the cats clawed their way into it the mob split, for Tim and Frank drove straight on. The fighting settlers and construction foremen charged with their shovels and crowbars and swept the Mexicans back farther and farther. The big cats humped themselves around, closed in from both sides, and the mob was trapped with the long, board-covered pile of sacked cement at its back, the settlers in front,

and the cats, their cylinders roaring defiance, crowding them closer, merciless, ponderous, terrible in their crushing power.

A united shout rose from the mob on the top of the northern cliff, for suddenly a line of makeshift chariots clanging behind madly charging mules rushed upon them. The road was gone, but Rainbow knew that hill, and he had found a way. The Mexicans frenziedly met the charge with picks and shovels, but there were trained soldiers in those chariots, and the mob was hurled aside, trampled and scattered.

Their "revolution" answered as it will always be answered by the men of American homes, Soapy Joe and his confederates deserted their dupes, only to fall into the hands of Hank Steele and his hard rock men, hands and men who were looking for them. The "revolution" was over. The hoarse cheers of the valley's men rang up and down the canyon, to be answered by a rumbling peal of thunder from above the far mountains of the west.

While a thoroughly capable squad rounded up the prisoners and marched them under guard to Mirage for shipment to the Mills of Justice, John Stanley and his associates took stock of the damage.

"Two engines are wrecked," he summed up, "but otherwise the machinery is serviceable. We

can't do anything, however, until these two engines are replaced, and that will—"

"We got to do somethin'!" interrupted Rainbow. "The bottom is goin' to drop out o' the sky up there somewheres! Mebbe it won't come fer a hour, mebbe not fer two er three days, but she's comin'!"

While they had been investigating and talking, Tim Walters was busy on top of the hill at the other side of the canyon. Hooking his big cat to the wreck of the mixer engine with chains, he dragged the wreck out of the way. Then Frank Drake's cat rolled up, humped itself this way and that, until its belt drive pulley was in line with the pulley on the big mixer. The belt had been torn in two, and while Frank and his swamper began lacing up the break, Tim turned his cat around.

Rolling down the road, he crossed the wash and approached the northern hill. Rolling, sliding, tipping crazily, the great cat clawed its way up the trail left by the scraper chariots, and clanked up to the wrecked mixer engine. The chains were hooked up and the wreck pulled to one side by the ninety horsepower monster. By a freak of the explosion the belt on the pulley of the engine had escaped uninjured, and Tim's cat moved into position, and backed into the belt held by willing hands.

Leaving the skinner's seat, Tim walked to the engine, leaned over the open-sided hood, and whispered to it while the great cat purred contentedly. Then, with a quick shove, Tim pushed the pulley clutch in, and the great concrete mixer began to turn slowly. Tim watched it a moment, then stepped back to the throttle. The purr rose to a booming march, the great mixer turned faster, ponderous, rumbling—to be joined almost instantly by a drumming thunder from the opposite side of the canyon, while as if in defiance the heavens above the invisible western mountains answered with a reverberating crash.

"We've got to pour ten feet more concrete!" shouted John Stanley. "That will hold the forms. It may save the dam!"

"When do we start!" the answer came back from scores of throats, hoarse, determined, grim.

"Every man who can run a gas engine report to Tim!" ordered Captain Stanley. "We've got ten engines to keep going! Rainbow, pick your mule skinners! The mules and trucks will have to haul everything from now on. The rest of you fall in below the crusher, so we can divide the crew!"

As in any group of homesteaders and settlers, nearly every craft and trade is represented, Tim quickly picked those who were to assist the regular white mechanics of the camp in keeping the

engines going steadily, for there would be no stopping of the work with the ending of an allotted time. It was a battle, and it must be fought night and day to a decision.

While Rainbow was picking his men, and Captain Stanley was dividing the others into equal crews to man the machinery and carry on the work at each end of the dam, Jerry saw Marjorie and Cal come into view on top of the hill. Her searching eyes leaped from man to man, and Jerry hurried to Cal's side, and reached a hand to her, looking up into her pale, anxious face.

"Oh, Jerry!" she breathed. "Thank God your're safe!"

"Of course I am," he assured her. "I saw you start. It was you and Cal and the boys and Rainbow who saved the dam!"

"I saw them—saw them rush at you—and you were alone—I—have been afraid to—"

"Shucks! ain't no sense in worryin' 'bout him!" Rainbow interrupted as he joined them. "He was born to be hung, I tell ye! Take a young feller like me, sort o' tender an' innercent, an' somethin' *might* a-happened to me!" he chuckled, and the color crept back into Marjorie's cheeks while she smiled.

"We're going straight through with the scrap now," Jerry told Marjorie. "The men won't leave this hill until all danger is past. You might

ride through the valley and tell the women, Marjorie. Some of them might come and help with grub and things," and soon Cal was swinging down the valley, stopping at each new home while Marjorie spread the news.

Under the direction of Captain Stanley and the construction foremen, the men were assigned to their posts and tasks. Some were placed on the dam guiding the linked pipes through which the concrete flowed from the mixers to its destined place. Others were assigned to the crushers, mixers, hoists, and sand crews, and all was ready.

One at a time the engines started. The pumps sucked the water from the wells and forced it through the pipes to both rims of the canyon with an even, clanking rhythm—the sand scoops grated and dragged on their long cables, and the hoists lifted their freight to the rattle of swiftly running gears—the splintering boom of the rock crushers told of rocks ground to pebbles in their iron jaws —their ponderous tread measured by a thudding rumble, the mixers sent the concrete flowing, rasping and grating through the pipes—the exhausts of the engines boomed an accompaniment to the marching song of the racing cylinders of the big cats—all joining in a mighty march of progress, booming to the heavens in a rhythmic, drumming thunder, the rolling of the drums of destiny.

Marjorie drove up from the valley with Nellie Walters, bringing in their wagon blankets and other things they thought Jerry and Tim might want. And following them came other wagons and other women to fight beside their men in this battle for their homes. On both hills the cook fires of the women were soon reflected in the skies. Food was brought from the camp kitchen and stores, and one by one the men dropped out for a hasty, long delayed supper, while their comrades kept the rock, sand, water and cement moving into the mixers, and the mixers sent it flowing into the dam.

All night the drums boomed on, and the cook fires of the women flamed beneath the skies. Weary, grim, determined, the men fought to keep pace with the thundering machines of steel. The weary crews bolted their breakfasts about the fires of the women, and turned back to their work. But the pace was impossible. The crews were reduced, and arranged in a series of short, but frequent shifts, and the men off duty slept in the shade of any shelter, utterly spent. Overhead the sun blazed from a sky of fathomless blue, but the invading battle fleets of black clouds sailed low across the west, the occasional muffled thunder of their guns booming threateningly.

Through another day the drums rolled on, and into another night, while the streams of con-

crete filled the moulds and the dam grew steadily higher, closer and closer to the safety level. For twenty feet above its foundation it was solid, seasoned. Above that it was green cement, but hardening rapidly, bracing the heavy forms against any shock. Haggard, too weary for speech, the men fought on for the vision within their hearts—a home on the land.

The thunder of the guns of the battling cloud-fleets boomed intermittently, coming closer, drifting far away, then rumbling nearer and nearer as the fleets slowly conquered the stars. Far to the west the heavens exploded. For an instant the desert lay ghastly white as if in terror. Then a crash smothered it with blackness. Like signal rockets the lightning illumined world and sky.

"It's comin'!" Rainbow told Captain Stanley. "The sky's busted up yonder!"

In the breathless darkness they waited. Even though no rain fell in the valley, Captain Stanley called Jerry, and together they went down onto the dam to send every man working there back to the rim of the canyon's cliffs. Climbing back to the cliff themselves, the captain and Jerry found Marjorie and the women waiting, watching. A low sound as of a rushing wind came out of the west, grew to a swishing rumble, and then to the roar of the cloudburst.

The watchers ceased to breathe. The roar

seemed to shake the night itself. With the lashing fury of a tidal wave breaking on a rock-fanged coast, a wall of water charged the dam. A rumbling boom echoed hollowly and muddy froth leaped clear to the brink of the cliffs. Breaking waves crashed against walls of rock, the hissing swish of troubled waters filled the night, and a signal flare of lightning was mirrored murkily in the bottom of the canyon. The dam was standing! The floods had paused!

XXVI

THE HERITAGE OF THE STRONG

THE timid dawn looked over the rim of the desert. Becalmed in the breathless air the invading cloud-fleets drifted together until their idle sails filled the heavens. Tense, silent, the women of the valley peered into the canyon from the brinks of the cliffs, trying to force their gaze through the dead half-light while the drums of destiny rolled on.

Slowly the dawn crept closer. The sides of the canyon took form. As if dodging from hiding place to hiding place, the darkness left jutting rocks naked in the gloom here and there. Men joined the women, the eyes of all probing the narrow, winding gorge. The night crept about a bend in the twisting canyon. Far down, nearly to the bottom, a dull yellowish sheet was stretched smoothly from wall to wall.

Excited calls rang through the booming song of the machinery, while the women and the men not on duty ran eagerly along the brink of the little canyon, and on and on to where it emerged on the western side of the hill. The basin-like plain was gone. Stretching away into the west the

yellowish sheet lay unruffled, dully luminous in the weird light. The dam had already imprisoned a little lake. Hurrying back, the people found John Stanley and Jerry measuring the water, and when Jerry shouted that it had reached the fourteen-foot level at the dam, cheers leaped from both brinks of the canyon to join above the waters of life in the new lake.

The sun sailed his destined course through the heavens unseen in the valley, but the men worked on, and the women kept their cook fires bright in the unnatural half-gloom. The world seemed tense, and as if the spirits of the western mountains were angry, plotting destruction of this thing which had blocked their plans to send a vengeful flood upon the land, the thunder echoed their challenge.

One battle had been won, and the soldiers pressed on to make their victory complete, on through a night when the blockading clouds allowed no star to send its light into the valley. With the coming of another hot dawn, another challenging flood was hurled at the dam. The heavens opened above a long and wide canyon to the southwest, the flood rushed down, carrying rocks and trees and brush and earth, roared into the basin of the plain above the hill, struck the edge of the lake, tripped with a splashing rumble—and a wave rolled across the lake,

bumped this way and that through the canyon and stopped with an impotent splash against the dam. The second flood had to spread itself thinly—and when John Stanley measured it he found the water had risen five feet, was nineteen feet deep.

The dam had stood twenty feet above the canyon's floor when the old crew struck and the soldiers took hold. Hour by hour and day by day it had grown until it was much higher, and for more than five feet above the nineteen foot water level the concrete had set, was solid, ready. Before the end of that day half of that five feet was covered, for another rushing attack was launched while thunder shook the world and flaming lightning consumed the fleets of the clouds.

As if summoned by the tang of water in the air of a thirsty land, a growing stream of men flowed into the valley. Some were discharged soldiers, but many were civilians, men of every craft and trade turning back to the land, for the project in the valley of the sun was open to every citizen. Some of the soldiers brought their brides with them to make their homes real, and with every one of the others came their wives, and their children.

John Stanley gave work to all of these who wanted it, and the construction crew grew and

expanded until full crews were working in eight hour shifts, working happily to the march boomed by the drums, while the dam climbed steadily higher. Hank Steele and his crew of hard rock men returned to their work on the outlet connecting the gates with the main canal, the ditch was blasted through the rock of the northern side of the canyon's mouth, and the canal linked with the dam.

Shacks and tiny homes grew here and there, seemingly overnight, marking plots alloted to the incoming homesteaders by Stanley and his assistants. Many of those who came were ready and anxious to get to work clearing and improving their own land, had money enough to carry them through to their first crop, and did not want work on the project. The stream of settlers flowed in until every plot of land in the project had been taken up, and while the work went ahead on the dam, men were also working in their fields, clearing, fencing, leveling, building houses, carrying on the business of a settled community.

The lake in the little canyon above the hill flashed silver in the starlight, or reflected the fleckless blue of the heavens, and the magic rock which flows like water flowed on to the thunder of the drums of desert destines, flowed on until it filled the canyon and became one rock from side

to side. And while the sunlight played upon still water the spirits were made happy, and men worked in fair fields, content, and the silence which spoke with the voice of thunder was stilled by the laughter of little children.

While John Stanley studied his next problem, the building of a second canal between the upper main waterway and where the river's wash drained the land to be irrigated under the project, and the associated problem of digging the lateral canals which would carry the water to the land of each settler, old Rainbow Ben began fussing, urging that the water be turned into the main canal.

"I should think you'd want to see if the water will run in that big ditch," he argued.

"I don't 'think' anything about it—I *know!*" the engineer replied a dozen times, but Rainbow argued on.

"The durn thing runs uphill!" he maintained. "These youngsters has been through quite a spell o' campaignin', an' seein' water in that ditch would be good fer their morals, as you sojers is always sayin'! On top o' that a lot of 'em is buyin' hawses an' sech. Ain't nary one o' 'em got a well yit, an' they have to haul their water. 'Course they cain't drink the canal water, they'd still have to haul drinkin' water, but they *could*

water their stock in the canal, an' that would help a heap!"

"My own problems have been so close I hadn't seen that," admitted John Stanley. "I thought you were joking, but I see you're right, Rainbow. If you'll ride through the ditch to make sure that everything is all right, I'll turn the water on this evening! There is still time before dark to inspect it."

When Jerry dismounted beside the barn that evening Marjorie came out of the house to meet him, dainty in a simple frock of checked gingham.

"What do you suppose Rainbow has persuaded the boss to do now?" Jerry asked.

"It's something nice, if Rainbow started it," she smiled, "but I can't imagine what it is—unless it's turning on the water!" she flashed. "He has been fussing about that for days!"

"He has argued the chief into doing it. The water will be turned into the main canal this evening!"

"This evening!" she exclaimed, clapping her hands, her eyes dancing. "Oh, Jerry! we must go to the canal and see it—I want to know that it is real!"

"Of course we'll go!" he enthused, "and we'll make sure it is wet!"

Through the soft darkness they walked together beneath the flaming stars. A little way

from home they came upon Cal, browsing at will as usual, and the lonesome pinto followed them while they walked slowly up the trail to Jerry's land, on over the knoll where his house had stood, and to his cleared field and the headgate in the canal in its upper corner.

"The water beat us! The canal is full!" Marjorie exclaimed, looking at the dull reflections of the stars.

"Yes, it beat us, and it is wet!" Jerry added, testing with an investigating finger, and the realization of victory made them silent. Full of dreams, they leaned upon the headgate watching the reflected stars grow brighter.

"Marjorie, you and I have been such good friends—" Jerry broke the silence at last, then paused while she looked up at him wonderingly, and he began again: "Why haven't you told me about Ramon? It made me feel—"

"About Ramon?" she interrupted.

"Yes, about you and Ramon," he insisted.

"I don't understeand—there is nothing—what do you want me to tell?" she puzzled.

"Please be fair to me, Marjorie," he pleaded. "I'm not an eavesdropper—but I have felt guilty ever since that first time Ramon came to see you after his discharge from the Army. I was coming home late from work, and when I was still quite a distance from the house I saw you

and Ramon talking in the light from the open door. He was standing beside his horse, and I knew he was just about to leave. I wanted to see him, but just as I started to call, you put your hands on his shoulders and lifted your face to him! I closed my eyes and turned away, I'm not a spy. Since then I've waited—feeling like—"

"Oh, Jerry!" she interrupted, her voice low, "I'm so sorry—*so* sorry you didn't come right in that night! I understand now why you've acted so—funny since then! Ramon was talking about Lenore—and he said such—such—"

"About Lenore?" he asked, too surprised to allow her to finish.

"Yes, Jerry," she told him softly. "Ramon loved her! He had never expected to marry her—and he knew she loved you—but oh! he loved her so! I was going to tell you, but the next evening, when you came home, you looked so haggard and worn that I thought it would be kinder not to talk about our sorrow. What did you do after—you saw us? You didn't come home."

"I rode all night," he told her huskily. I don't understand—"

"All night!" she echoed, interrupting. "I'm so sorry, Jerry, *so* sorry!" she added softly. "Ramon had been telling me that he felt he would

soon be the leader of his people, that his duty lay with them, but just before he left he talked of Lenore again—so beautifully—so sacredly, Jerry, that I kissed him! I felt as if I were doing it for her! I couldn't help it—my heart just overflowed!"

"Forgive me, Marjorie," he pleaded. "I'm glad you did—and it wasn't what you did anyway, it was my interpretation of it! But I can't get used to—to Ramon loving Lenore! I did not say a word of love to either of you girls until the night I went away—I had nothing to offer—couldn't say anything—but I thought it was you Ramon loved, and that you liked him! Ever since you girls and Ramon and I have known each other, you always paired me with Lenore, while you kept out of the way, or took Ramon for a partner!"

"You know our little story, Lenore's and mine," Marjorie said gently. "She kept me when we were left alone. She was only sixteen, but she gave her girlhood, even—even her life, Jerry, to keep me with her—to make a home for me. She was never as strong as I naturally was, but she worked in a factory, and the dust brought on her throat trouble. But she kept on until I could finish a high school business course, so that I would not have to work in a factory. She gave up everything for me, Jerry, and—and from

the first I knew she—loved you! It wasn't—I couldn't be—wouldn't be her rival, Jerry!"

For a long time they were silent under the spell of the desert night, and when Cal came back to them they both patted him absently. Then, still in silence, they turned from the headgate and walked slowly away. But they had gone only a dozen paces when Rainbow Ben slipped out of the darkness, carrying a crowbar. Working quickly, he pried the water gate open, and a flood rushed out upon the land, gurgling swiftly down the corrugations of the old kaffir field, and flowing about the feet of the two walking so silently under the stars. Cal snorted, and in a flash Jerry picked Marjorie up in his arms, and held her while he turned, startled, only to hear old Rainbow chuckling.

"What are you doing, you old lizard!" Jerry demanded, unable to be angry with Rainbow. "Trying to drown us?"

"Jes' experimentin'!" Rainbow answered. "This water is plumb first class! She runs uphill in this ditch, an' she runs downhill through this gate!" he went on, shutting off the water, while Jerry carried Marjorie to dry land.

But when Jerry set Marjorie upon her feet beside a Joshua tree he did not take his arm from around her shoulders, and Cal nosed them unheeded.

"Sufferin' sidewinders!" chuckled Rainbow to himself, watching the dim figures. "Talk about two-handed shootin'! Why! Saray an' Betsey never done better'n that! Here I been a'waitin' jes' about forever an' four days to see the water on this land, an' schemin' to git them youngsters into a clinch! I had to fuss an' figger a heap to get the chief to turn the water into this ditch, but jes' at the right minnit I thought o' hawses an' sech! They done it! An' I turned some water on the land, an' jes' look what's happened a'ready!" and he vanished into the soft darkness, chuckling.

"I loved both of you girls so much—love you both so much now," Jerry began huskily, "that I've never known which I—cared the most for. I told Lenore the truth—I did love her—love her now. Perhaps there was a little difference in—in the way I felt—but it didn't matter, doesn't matter. Lenore was so—was of the spirit, but you were—*are* a comrade, a mate! I loved you before I knew Lenore well enough to—appreciate—"

"I know, Jerry," she interrupted softly, looking up at him, a wonderful light in her eyes. "I knew then—I could feel it—and—I cared then—" she went on hesitantly but bravely, "—but I couldn't let you know—it was hard—*so* hard—but I am happy now because I—be-

cause you—*we* let Lenore have a little happiness!"

"But what did you mean," he asked, holding her closer, "when you said that you had 'half a home' that night we were talking, just after we had proved up on our land?"

"It was something I had been thinking—I didn't mean to say it," she whispered, hiding her face against his shoulder.

For a moment he was silent, his hand smoothing her hair, then he tilted her face, looked into her shining eyes, and kissed her lips, straining her to him, yearningly, crushingly. For a space they whispered so low that neither Cal nor the old Joshua spreading his fantastic arms about them could hear, and then he asked her again about her "half a home."

"It was just that I—that my land and things—and me, made half a home, and your land, and you, made the other half—and—"

But he interrupted with something besides words, and again the old Joshua and Cal listened vainly. At last they started homeward with Cal walking beside them, and their way led across the ground wet by the water Rainbow had released. Again Jerry lifted Marjorie in his arms, and she lay against his heart, her own heart singing.

"You'll get your feet wet!" she warned.

"I want to get them wet—wet right here on this land!" he answered, and tramped across the soaked stretch.

"Put me down," Marjorie insisted when they reached dry ground again. "I like it—knowing that you can carry me—you may have to sometimes," she admitted as he set her on her feet. "But, Jerry, I want to walk right here!" she added earnestly, standing beside him, her arm about his shoulder, his about her waist. "No matter what the trail is like, or where it leads, I want to walk right here!" and they went on, walking together to claim their heritage, the heritage of the strong.

THE END.

The following sample pages were taken at random from

THROUGH *the* SHADOWS WITH O. HENRY

By AL. JENNINGS

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THROUGH THE SHADOWS WITH O. HENRY

CHAPTER I.

A wilderness of snow—wind tearing like a ruffian through the white silence—the bleak pines setting up a sudden roar—a woman and four children hurrying through the waste.

And abruptly the woman stumbling exhausted against a little fence corner and the four children screaming in terror at the strange new calamity that had overtaken them.

The woman was my mother—the four children, the oldest 8, the youngest 2, were my brothers. I was born there in that fence corner in the snow in Tazwell County, Virginia, November 25, 1863. My brothers ran wild through the Big Basin of Burke's Gardens, crying for help. My mother lay there in a fainting collapse from her five days' flight from the Tennessee plantation.

The Union soldiers were swooping down on our plantation. My father, John Jennings, was a colonel in the Confederate army. He sent a courier warning my mother to leave everything, to take the children

CHAPTER X.

I wanted a drink and I wanted it quick. My tongue was hot and my feet were cold. I didn't have time to waste trying to make the natives of Honduras understand my perplexity. I caught sight of the American flag. In that parched and unslaked moment it meant the joy of freedom—liberty of the throat and the tongue.

Under the ripple of that flag I felt certain that I would find some kindred soul. I did.

On the porch of the squat wooden bungalow that housed the American consulate, sat an ample, dignified figure in immaculate white ducks. He had a large, nobly-set head, with hair the color of new rope and a full, straight-glancing gray eye that noted without a sparkle of laughter every detail of my ludicrous makeup.

He was already serene and comfortably situated with liquor, but he had about him an attitude of calm distinction. A rather pompous dignitary, he seemed to me, sitting there as though he owned the place. This, I thought, is indeed a man worthy to be the American consul.

I felt like a newsboy accosting a millionaire.

CHAPTER XV.

Like aimless drifters in a boat that has neither rudder nor compass, we started on that tour of investigation. We planned to loll along, stopping as we would, looking for a pleasant soil in which to plant ourselves. But we made not the slightest effort to map our course.

And then suddenly, across that idle way, there rippled a little stick of chance, an incident so trivial and insignificant we scarcely noticed it. In a moment it had broken the waters and our boat was all but wrecked by the unconsidered wisp. Bill Porter nearly lost his life for a smile!

The captain of the Helena was at our service. We stopped at Buenos Aires and rode out through the pampas country on the saltas river.

Peru was no more alluring. We were looking for big game. And the mighty pastime of this realm was the shooting of the Asiatic rats that stampeded the wharves.

For no particular reason, two of us being acknowledged fugitives and the third a somewhat mysterious soldier of fortune, we stopped off at Mexico city. We knew Porter only as Bill. I had told him the main

CHAPTER XVII.

O. Henry has been called a democrat, a citizen of the world. The laboratory wherein he caught and dissected the hearts of men and women was in the alleys and honkatonks. He sought to interpret life in the raw, not in the superficial livery disguising it on the broadways. The underdog was his subject. But at heart he was an aristocrat.

He had all the proud sensitiveness of the typical southern gentleman. He liked to mingle with the masses; he was not one of them. Gladly he threw in his lot with a pair of bandits and fugitives. It would have cut him to the soul to have been branded as one of them.

For his haughty nature, the ramble from Mexico to San Diego and up the coast to San Francisco was fraught with disagreeable suspense. It was humiliating to "be on the dodge."

I will never forget the look of chagrin that spread over his face when I bumped against him and Frank just as the ferry boat was swinging into the slip.

"Sneak," I said. "They're here."

The chief of the Wells Fargo detectives was on the boat. He had brushed against my arm. Before

CHAPTER XX.

I did not want to see Bill Porter in convict stripes. For months we shared the same purse, the same bread, the same glass. We had traveled through South America and Mexico together. Not a word had he said of his past. And here it was torn open for me to see and the secret he had kept so quietly shouted out in his gray, prison suit with the black band running down the trousers. The proudest man I have ever known was standing outside a barred door, dispensing quinine and pills to jailbirds.

"Colonel, we have the same tailor, but he does not provide us with the same cut of clothes," the old droll, whimsically drawled out without a chuckle. I looked into the face that would have scorned to show its emotion. It was still touched with grave, impressive hauteur, but the clear eyes, in that moment, seemed filmed and hurt.

I think it was about the only time in my life I did not feel like talking. Bill was looking at my ill fitting hand me downs. I had received the castoff clothes of some other prisoner. They hung on me like the flapping rags on a scare crow. The sleeves were rolled up and the trousers tucked back. My shoes were four

CHAPTER XXIV.

Porter met me at the door of the construction office and with elaborate burlesque paid tribute to my accomplishments. "Here is a financier worthy to sit with the elect. The colonel kills with a deft equanimity equaled only by the finesse of Louisa in seasoning the gravy."

Louisa was the nickname given to the French gentleman sent to the Ohio penitentiary on a charge of embezzlement. He was dapper, swarthy, mannered like a prince—the chief clerk in the construction office and the man responsible for the magic kitchenette concealed behind the walls of the office.

Louisa was official chef of the "Recluse Club." He turned out mince pies and roast beef that would have made the eyes of Dives bulge with envy. He measured to the grain all his ingredients and he followed minutely the instructions in a big cook book.

If the prison had suddenly been changed into paradise it would have seemed no more miraculous than the scene in this improvised banquet room. A fairy table, decorated with wild flowers and set for six, was laden with all manner of delicacies—olives, radishes, sugar, cream, white bread, lettuce, tomatoes.

CHAPTER XXVI.

Dick Price had been in prison ever since he was a little fellow of 11. There were a few wretched years in the outer world. It was not freedom.

Bill Porter took but one incident out of that tragic life for his story, "A Retrieved Reformation." His Jimmy Valentine is a rather debonair crook—but in the moment when he throws off his coat, picks up his tools and starts to open the safe, in that moment there is crowded the struggle and the sacrifice of a lifetime. It goes to the heart, quick and piercing, when Jimmy's chance of happiness seems lost; it sends the breath into the throat with a quiver of joy when he wins out in the end. Porter has touched the strings so deftly because the whole shadow of Dick Price's broken life hovers in the background of the story.

Dick was that convicts call a "stir bug." He had been in the pen so long he had become morose, sour, a brooding sort. But he was as square a man as Christ ever put on the earth. Dick was the fellow that tried to save me from the beating and the contract after my attempt to escape. I had done him a little favor and he was ready to have his flesh torn to ribbons in gratitude.

CHAPTER XXIX.

When the cell door closed on Dick I stood watching the range, hoping he would come out again. In prison men grow superstitious. I wondered if his bitter conviction that the pardon would never be granted was a premonition. I went back to the office—the chill breath of fear putting down the ardent hope the warden's promise has raised.

Every man in the pen knew what Dick had done. They talked about it, advancing the most fantastic theories as to Dick's method.

Bill Porter came over to the warden's office that night. His visits were always welcome. There was in Bill's warm, quiet humor, a sunny cheer, an uplifting happiness that seemed to catch one by the neck of the spirit and shake him free from the harassing pettiness of prison life.

When Billy Raidler and I could not rouse each other, we kept our ears tuned for Bill's voice at the door. He would come in, sniff the moodiness in the air and breeze it away with a dash of his buoyant gaiety.

Bill's humor was not the offspark of happiness, but of the truth as he saw it. He was not an incorrigible

CHAPTER XXXI.

Such is the story of Jimmy Valentine as it unfolded itself in the Ohio penitentiary. O. Henry takes the one great episode in that futile life and with it he wins the tears and the grateful smiles of the nation. In that throbbing silence, when the ex-con opens the safe and the little sister of the girl he loves is saved from suffocation, Jimmy as he might have been, not Jimmy as he was, is before us. Few who have breathed hard in that gripping moment would have denied Dick Price his chance, would have refused him the pardon he earned, would have doomed him to his forlorn and lonely death in the prison hospital.

Bill Porter was not the grim artist to paint that harsh picture for the world. He loved a happy ending. He could not even give the exact details of the safe opening. It was too cruel for his winsome fancy.

That was ever Bill's way. He took the facts, but he twisted them as he would. I asked him about it later. In the story he gives the hero a costly set of tools wherewith to open the vault. He does not have him file his nails.

"Colonel, it chills my teeth to think of that gritting operation," he said. "I prefer the set of tools. I don't

CHAPTER XXXVI.

The shadows of a thousand Dick Prices and Ira Maralatts skulked like unhappy ghosts through the cell corridors of the Ohio penitentiary. The memory of a thousand tragedies seemed to abide in the very air of the ranges. Men who allowed themselves to come under the persistent gloom of these haunting presences went mad.

The rest of us sought an outlet in gayety—in a hundred trivial little incidents that would bring a laugh out of all proportion to their funniness. In self-defense, the convict becomes hardened to the brutal suffering of the life about him.

If any one had heard Billy Raidler, Bill Porter and I, as we talked and guffawed in the prison post-office, he would have rated us an unthinking trio of irresponsible scamps.

We never aired our melancholy, but we would wrangle and jest by the hour over the probable course a fly batting itself against the postoffice window might take if we let it out—over the origin of the black race and the finish of the Caucasian family.

Or we would imagine that the prison was suddenly crushed to pieces in an earthquake, and we would

CHAPTER XXXVII.

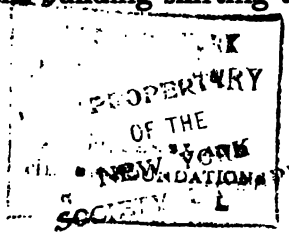
There was a light tap at the postoffice door. Billy opened it and took something from the prisoner standing there and softly closed the door. He handed a card to me. In his own handwriting was Bill Porter's name and underneath a drawing of the steward's office.

"Who brought the card?" I asked.

"Bill; he's out there. Shall I let him in?" Raidler was in a whimsical mood. The light tap was repeated. I answered it.

"Gentlemen, why be so exclusive?" Porter walked in with a very pompous air, his shoulders thrown back in an exaggerated swagger. "Permit me to inform you that I have changed my residence. The card will enlighten you as to my present domicile. I moved to-day."

There was a new enthusiasm in his bantering voice. Porter had been appointed secretary to the steward. The position, with the single exception of the secretaryship to the warden, was the best in the pen. It took him beyond the walls. The steward's office was directly across the street from the pen, the edge of the building skirting the river.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